

Horror in Culture & Entertainment

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THE **SADNESS**

INSIDE
THE MOST
VIOLENT
AND
DEPRAVED
ZOMBIE
MOVIE
EVER
MADE

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ISSUE **201** JULY/AUGUST 2021 US \$12.95 CAN \$13.95



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ROMERO**

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BUT IS IT REALLY
HELL?



Ages 17+



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AND MORE HORROR LEGENDS!

Written by Dave Alexander, co-owner and former
editor-in-chief of horror magazine *Rue Morgue*!

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by **ROCCO T. THOMPSON**

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NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND

Once upon a time, in a reality that couldn't be further from the one I now occupy, I strapped on a helmet, elbow pads, and a pair of quads to roller skate in counter-clockwise circles while other skaters tried to turn me into a skid mark on the track. I played roller derby, in other words – that post-third wave/riot grrl movement that took a “sports entertainment” cultural curio from the 1970s and repurposed it into something grassroots and punk rock with an emphasis on feminine agency. For me, it was a great way to get some exercise, meet rad folx, and vent some frustrations through my derby alter ego – “Hellbat” (so dubbed by my teammates because I skated as quick as the proverbial winged mammal loosed from the inferno) feared no bitch and wore blooming purple hip bruises without shame.

Hellbat had a good run, as they say, and call it tenacity or outright foolishness, it took two concussions within the space of six months for her to hang up her skates for good. It broke my heart; not only was Hellbat part of my identity that I wasn't yet ready to let go of, but retiring due to injury meant the warranty on a body that could bounce back after impact had evidently expired. Recovery from



that head injury cost me much over the years that followed – a job, a relationship, and bouts of breathtaking neck pain that strike out of nowhere to this day – but I can't fully regret my derby career when it led me down a path that eventually brought me to where I am now.

This is why I love a good underdog story in horror, and this particular issue is full of 'em. As the forthcoming book *Untold Horror* (see pg. 30) reminds us, even established genre celebrities have a tough time getting projects greenlit, and sometimes for no better reason than clashing personalities. Heck, even George A. Romero had enough doors slammed in his face for him to question the significance of his legacy, leading to the establishment of a non-profit foundation in his

name (see pg. 20). For Rob Jabbaz – a Canadian who moved to Taiwan after *this magazine* (apparently) turned him away – a chance meeting with a former pop star led to the creation of what is surely Taiwan's most controversial bit of genre cinema to date.

Jabbaz's new film *The Sadness* can only be described as an all-out sensory assault of zombie carnage, sexual depravity, and gore galore, and while its no-hold-barred violence certainly won't appeal to everyone, for something so shocking to even *exist* is a win in my book. These are the victories I love to celebrate in *Rue Morgue*; when it comes to art, especially an art form as divisive and beloved as horror, existence is its own reward, and that's true of movies that push the envelope, podcasts that offer diverse voices, and magazines that remain fiercely independent for over two decades and counting. The greater the risk, the greater the reward, and the genre we love didn't get to where it has by creatives playing it safe. Sometimes you've gotta strap on your skates and give it your all, even if you wind up on your ass.

And who knows, maybe Hellbat's abbreviated athletic career knocked some sense into Andrea Subissati, forcing her to make some changes that were more crucial than they were comfortable. And so when my neck suddenly seizes up, forcing me to do the robot in the produce aisle, I remind myself (through gritted teeth) that growth doesn't come from winning but from overcoming the obstacles that stood in your way. And now, as the pinprick light at the end of the pandemic tunnel grows, we've certainly learned some things about ourselves and each other. Let's write humanity's next chapter with the same boldness, gumption, and metaphorical balls as *The Sadness*... except maybe with less penile enucleation!

ANDREA SUBISSATI
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RUE MORGUE #201 is lovingly dedicated to Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds, First Hound of the House of Horror. R.I.P.

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Design by Andrew Wright

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POST MORTEM

COMMENTS • QUESTIONS • CRITICISM



I GREATLY ENJOY the content of each issue, but felt you took the chintzy way out by not having your last anniversary issue and milestone issue *RM#200* square-bound. I am hoping they will return soon!

JEFF PUBAL – ADDRESS WITHHELD

We blame the pandemic and hope to be able to bring back perfect binding soon! - Ed

I ALWAYS SAVE Bowen's Basement till the end. It's my favourite, and this time it hit home in a special way. My folks saw *Gargoyles* on a date night when they were first married. They thought it was the bee's knees. They saw it again in the '90s and thought it sucked, now it's one of my mother's go-to stories. "When your father and I were first married, we saw *Gargoyles*. We thought it was so scary, etc." I've heard the story 1000 times. I'm so excited, I'm going to call her now and read her the article. Thanks John W. Bowen!

EDWIN CLARENCE GRAVES, VIA FACEBOOK

CONGRATULATIONS to the greatest horror magazine ever, continuing through the pandemic into the 21st century! I loved the 200th issue and it had only one black mark – Bowen's article on *Gargoyles*. Is he fucking nuts? That movie was great in '72, when it aired on CBS on a Friday night at 8:30 and it's still great now. The late great Stan Winston did the suits and it has a great cast! What it needs is a Blu-ray but not a remake!

ROB MORGANBESSER – CLIFTON PARK, NEW YORK

THE BEST MAGAZINE in the business. I connect so much deeper with *Rue Morgue* as I don't feel attacked for who I am from their content. No political oversaturation. Just love of the content.

@NEONOVAXX, VIA TWITTER

I LOVE THE WAY you guys throw some paranormal stuff into your magazine. "A Trip to Area 51" [Shadowlands, *RM#200*] really caught my attention, because one of my big investigations was at Area 51. We were able to camp out at the Ale Inn and watch the night skies and two of my investigators claimed that they saw two high-flying disc-shaped UFOs. I did some interviews and one lady that worked at the Ale Inn said that she

saw a man flying a winged flying vehicle and hovered eye level with her and waved. If this is true, there are plenty of things going on at Area 51. I loved your feature on Oliver Stone. Oliver Stone is a living legend. The man is a genius and the movies that he was involved in will always be ingrained in my mind, especially *Midnight Express*, *Scarface* and *Platoon*. So realistic, and his movies have a shock value to them because so many scenes will play over and over again in your mind. Not too many writers and directors can do that. Oliver Stone has that magic touch!

PAUL DALE ROBERTS, VIA EMAIL

FOUND THIS in the ol' closet today!

@CAPTAINWEREWOLF, VIA INSTAGRAM



I WAS CLEANING a bit ago and found the last three issues of *Rue Morgue*, which I hadn't read (until now)! Anyways, I came here to say that Stacie Ponder's pieces in *RM#198* on Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Kairo* (a.k.a. *Pulse*) and Sion Sono's *Suicide Club* are phenomenal.

@SHANNON_MCGREW, VIA TWITTER

RE: PLAY THE THEREMIN Like Thea on *Rue Morgue TV* – Thank you *Rue Morgue* and Thea

for the demo of the underappreciated theremin. It's got a unique voice and is quite flexible in a whole range of musical styles like Clara Rockmore's classical interpretation to Dorit Chrysler's rock style used during Trentemøller's live version of "Silver Surfer, Ghost Rider Go!!!" at the Roskilde festival (fun video on its own). Cheers from Vancouver.

PHILBERT DEZ, VIA YOUTUBE

HAILS. Another – but not a fellow – white, cis, hetero guy here. *Rue Morgue* is absolutely crushing it from every perspective. Keep it up. I recently ordered a whole load of *The Dark Side* issues off eBay and even by '90s standards, they are misogynistic, racist, and homophobic. It renders the whole thing gunk and made me all the more appreciative of what you do and how you do it. *Rue Morgue* is diverse, representative, and inclusive without being preachy. You'd have to be pretty insecure to feel threatened by the editorial approach. You have my allegiance.

ALI MALONEY – ADDRESS WITHHELD

AS A QUEER HORROR FAN, do I watch Eurovision or crack open my new *Rue Morgue* first? There is no wrong answer.

@FLIPLEY, VIA TWITTER

CONGRATULATIONS to @RueMorgue on their 200th issue! Hoping for 200 more!

@MONSTERSRREEL, VIA TWITTER

RE: ABSINTHE WITH Andrea on *Rue Morgue TV* – Visiting a haunted house with *actual Canyman*, how many people can say they've done that? In every interview or Q&A I've seen with Clive Barker, he has so many great things to say, and a fascinating mind. Loved this segment! Maybe I'll try and think of a question worth answering on the next one.

BENJAMIN POWELL, VIA YOUTUBE

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CORONER'S REPORT

WEIRD STATS & MORBID FACTS

ISSUE #
201

Earlier this year, researchers sonified the structure of a spiderweb, assigning different frequencies to web strands to create "notes" that generate haunting melodies when played using a harp-like instrument.

Star Shawnee Smith was four months pregnant with her son Jakson during the filming of 2005's [Saw II](#).

One superstition echoed by cultures from all over the world warns that you should never whistle at night. In most versions of the legend, doing so attracts wandering ghosts, demons, or the Devil.

The 1944 film [The Mummy's Ghost](#) is one of a very few Universal Horror Classics where the female lead doesn't survive the movie.

Every weekend through May 2021, "vaccination marathons" were held at Romania's Bran Castle, popularly known as Dracula's Castle. Nationals who got the shot received a "vaccination diploma" with a fanged medical worker brandishing a syringe, and free entry to the castle's torture rooms.

Although Jeff Lieberman's [Squirm](#) claims to be based on an actual incident that took place in Fly Creek, Georgia, the film is entirely fictional and there is no such place as "Fly Creek."

Optophobia is described as the fear of opening one's eyes.

Veteran genre actor [John Saxon](#) starred in four films with the word "Blood" in their titles: *Blood Beast from Outer Space* (1965), *Queen of Blood* (1966), *Blood Beach* (1980) and *Blood Salvage* (1990).

Kristopher Moules, a Pennsylvania Corrections Officer, and inmate Timothy Gilliam Jr. fell to their deaths after an altercation caused them to slam into the exterior of fifth floor elevator doors, which popped open and sent the men down the shaft. Moules' death was ruled a homicide and Gilliam's an accident.

The third season *X-Files* episode "Piper Maru," in which a mysterious black oil is introduced to the series, was named after Gillian Anderson's daughter, who was born during the production of the second season.

Arnold Schwarzenegger was inspired to work with director Kim Jee-woon for his movie [The Last Stand](#) after being impressed by 2010's [I Saw the Devil](#).

Seven breeds of dog account for 98% of all fatal dog attacks. They are: Pit Bull, German Shepherd, Chow, Malamute, Husky, wolf hybrids, and the Akita.

After spending three years in a federal reformatory and a stint in San Quentin State Penitentiary in California, *Motel Hell* star Rory Calhoun worked several odd jobs, including cow-puncher and lumberjack.

COMPILED BY BENOIT BLACK
GOT A WEIRD STAT OR MORBID FACT?
SEND IT TO: INFO@RUE-MORGUE.COM

RECORDING OFFICER

FURTHER ACTION ☒

HOMICIDE ☐

EXPIRING MINDS...

ON RUE MORGUE'S
SOCIAL MEDIA

You're a zombie! Whose brain do you first target for consumption and why?

Ideally vegetarians, less likely to have prions.

@ULAHOOOP, VIA TWITTER

A baby. Hear me out: your first time out, you're going to want the advantage of a fontanelle.

@ULTRADAMNO, VIA TWITTER

Someone whose brain is on drugs, because I understand that those taste like eggs.

SCOTT HENDERSON, VIA FACEBOOK

The closest? Brains is brains. Zombies don't pick and choose. Not like it's a snack aisle with Sour Cream and Lives, BBQ Cortex, and Flamin' Hot Cerebellum options.

@METEORSHIT86, VIA TWITTER

Zack Snyder, stop him from making any more shitty zombie films!

KEVIN NACHT NUIT, VIA FACEBOOK

Wife, 'cause she's sitting right next to me and I wouldn't do the dogs like that.

QIN MARSHALL, VIA FACEBOOK

FINAL WORDS

AS CAPTIONED BY YOU ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA



"FIRST ONE TO BLINK HAS TO TELL LEATHERFACE HE NEEDS DEODORANT!"

THIS MONTH'S CAPTION CONTEST WINNER IS
DICK CAMERON, @DICKCAMERON7 VIA TWITTER

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MYSTERY INSIDE THE WINCHESTER HOUSE

While the reviews for 2018's *Winchester* weren't terribly kind, it's actually a competent haunted house tale with some effective visuals, plus you could do far worse than casting Helen Mirren as the matriarch of the infamous [Winchester House](#). The problem, though, is that the film uses the ever-sprawling estate as a vehicle for a straightforward ghost story when the true story is far more compelling.

When Sarah Winchester moved from Connecticut to California in 1886, she brought with her a fair amount of grief, having lost both her infant daughter and her husband. William Winchester, the son of Winchester Repeating Rifle founder Oliver Winchester, left his widow with 50% ownership of the company and what today would be over \$500 million.

Needless to say, Sarah had the means to make some renovations on her newly purchased eight-room home, but no one could have predicted how extensive those renovations would be. Over the course of 36 years, she spent the period equivalent of \$71 million to expand the home to approximately 160 rooms, including six kitchens, thirteen bath-

rooms, and 10,000 windows.

We say "approximately" 160 rooms, because no one can seem to get an accurate count — the result of Sarah's updates resembles something out of an MC Escher painting. The craftsmanship was top-of-the-line, including gold chandeliers and stained-glass windows designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany (yes, that Tiffany), but much of the work defied logic; there were trapdoors and secret passages throughout the house, several flights of stairs that didn't actually go anywhere, and some of the doors opened to blank brick walls or, in one case, opened from the second storey out into the yard below.

In an effort to explain Sarah's motivations, *Winchester* leans into the theory that she was haunted by ghosts of the many people killed by Winchester rifles and that by building a series of rooms that recreate the places where people were killed, she can manifest their spirits and bring them peace. But in reality, no one knows for sure what motivated Sarah. Some of the wilder theories include that she was indeed haunted, or that she was part of a mystic society and the renovations were inspired by philosopher Francis Bacon. Others are much more innocuous, claiming that she

was just working through her grief or simply keeping labourers employed.

Ultimately, that's the mystery that makes the Winchester House such a compelling wonder. Nearly a hundred years after Sarah Winchester's death, people flock to see this anomaly in Southern California, perhaps with some small hope that they might be able to unlock its mysteries or get some glimpse into the psyche of its eccentric former occupant.

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER



WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

The Lost Boys' "Sexy Sax Man"

◀ If there's one thing about [The Lost Boys](#)' fictional town of Santa Carla we'd love to actually experience, it's an outdoor Tim Cappello concert on the boardwalk. However brief his oiled and shirtless appearance in the 1987 Joel Schumacher film was (twelve seconds, to be exact), it was memorable enough to make the Sexy Sax Man into a pop culture icon, even going so far as being parodied by Jon Hamm on *Saturday Night Live* in 2011. Unbeknownst to some, the Conservatory-trained Cappello has had an illustrious

career performing onstage as a gig musician alongside Tina Turner, Ringo Starr, and Peter Dinklage, among others. The pandemic put a damper on his solo tour (his first CD, *Blood on the Reed*, came out in 2018), but his *Lost Boys* role was revived in the 2016 Vertigo Comics adaptation, and the 65-year-old claims he's open to appearing in a cameo role in the upcoming TV reboot.

ANDREA SUBISSATI



NEEDFUL THINGS



1 BLOODY ZOMBIE BOOKENDS

\$39.95 USD

Keep your undead library in check with a pair of hand-painted resin zombie bookends. Measuring 7 inches high and 11 inches wide (combined), they're the perfect complement to your collection of zombie survival guides. Cardio not included!

Design toscano.com



2 CORPSE PAINT FACE MASKS

6€

Pamper your mortal coil with death metal with these corpse paint mask packs from Finnish skincare brand Kaamos Cosmetics. Available in soothing green tea and moisturizing rice bran formulas, they may be vegan and cruelty-free but the original artwork by J.P. Ahonen is nothing short of brutal!

Kaamos.co

3 HELLO KIDDIES SWIMSUIT

\$60 - 65 USD

Summertime means haunting the lagoon like the creature that you are, so Poltergeists and Paramours has you covered (the important bits, anyway) with this line of spooktastic swimwear! With a variety of patterns and cuts to choose from, you'll be a wisecracking poolside prankster just like the legendary Cryptkeeper himself.

Poltergeistsandparamours.com



4 BLACKBURN'S ORIGINAL MONSTER SAUCE

\$8 USD

We love to see *RM* alumni forging new trails, so when we found out our former Monstro Bizarro columnist Lyle Blackburn was offering up Monster sauce, we had to give it a taste! The first in his line is "Rogue Red Chili," boasting big (Sasquatch-sized) taste and legendary flavour – try it, if you dare!

Lyleblackburn.com



5 SUGAR CUBE SKULLS

\$10 USD

Día De Los Muertos is still a few months away, but these classic sugar skulls can make every day a gothic tea party! Packaged in sets of nine or four, these cubes contain just over two teaspoons of ultrafine unflavoured sugar, perfect for any hot beverage. And if you're looking to party with the green fairy, Dem Bones makes a version especially for absinthe as well.

Dembonesshoppe.com



CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES

SKULLY RESIN ART TOY BY CHERRY MOTH CAKE

The Baltimore-based husband-and-wife team of illustrator Nick and toymaker Lindsay DiFabbio are known in the collectibles world as Cherry Moth Cake, and Skully is their signature creature. Sporting a single horn sprouting from his forehead and a gruesome skull peering through a hole where his face should be, Skully's blistering neon colourways make him an unmissable addition to any collector's shelf.

INSPIRATION

"Ghosts have been our 'thing' for years and while our products range thematically from trippy to goofy to scary; monster and horror themes are always some of our favourites to work with," says Lindsay. "I've always been a fan of small toys I can put in my pocket and whip out for a pic or just for playing on the spot, and Nick loves to have a display shelf in his work area or in the living room, so the benefits to running multiple sizes of toys were clear early on, since not all toy collectors do the same things with their collections."

MATERIALS

Resin, acrylic paint, and enamel paint.

PRICE

Pocket-sized variants (1½" tall) sell for \$14; larger figures are around \$120.

FIND IT

Cherry-moth-cake.myshopify.com

CHRIS HAMMOND



VINTAGE AND CLASSIC

BONE SHAKER CANDY BONBONS

Swizzels Matlow, Ltd., 1983

Released by UK candy manufacturer Swizzels Matlow, Ltd, Bone Shaker was a favourite amongst horror-fixated kids in the 1980s. Nearly identical to the earlier-released Mr. Bones, which was first produced in the late 1970s by American bubble gum and trading card maker Fler, Bone Shaker consisted of colourful, interlocking pieces of bone-shaped candy that could be connected to make a miniature skeleton. The candy was housed in fantastic, plastic coffin-shaped containers that kids could play with afterwards, and many an action figure was "buried" in one in the schoolyard. The coffins

came in red, blue, purple, pink, yellow, and green, and under the lid was a diagram of the candy skeleton for assembly. Bone Shaker was available in Canada and the UK for a few years during the 1980s, while Fler would continue to produce Mr. Bones up until the early '90s. The Bone Shaker containers are more difficult to find than the Mr. Bones release, and can fetch up to \$50 apiece.

JAMES BURRELL

MORE CRYPTIC COLLECTIBLES AT RUE-MORGUE.COM





WHEN A CANADIAN ANIMATOR WENT TO LIVE IN TAIWAN, HE WOUND UP MAKING ONE OF THE MOST INTENSELY VIOLENT ZOMBIE MOVIES TO COME OUT OF THE FAR EAST. DIRECTOR **ROB JABBAZ** RECOUNTS THE STORY OF HIS INSTANT CULT CLASSIC ***THE SADNESS***

LIVE-EATEN IN THE FAST

BY **ROCCO T. THOMPSON**

While most of the world was in a nosedive as COVID-19 spread, uncontrolled, across the planet, [Rob Jabbaz](#) was gearing up to make his first feature film. The Mississauga-born Canadian expat was given a rare opportunity by Taiwan, the place he's called home for more than a decade, due to its aggressive response to the virus; in a country where patriotism equals responsibility to one's own community and doing your part for the collective good, the disease took much longer to gain a foothold. While the Hollywood machine shut down, Jabbaz shot [The Sadness](#) — an ultra-violent, sexually disturbed shocker in which a mysterious infection unshackles humanity's

basest, most vile impulses, and threatens the lives of two young lovers (Berant Zhu and Regina Lei) as they struggle to fight their way back to each other across a ravaged Taipei. Production was extremely fast. Developed over eight months, the film was written in the spring, shot in the summer, and edited during the fall. Sound design and post-production were completed before the end of winter, and it was released nationwide in Taiwan this past January.

Set in an alternate, dysfunctional Taiwan with an irresponsible government and cynical population, the world of *The Sadness* couldn't be more different from the country that Jabbaz loves and inhabits, but that did little to temper the ire of the moviegoing public. Though local critics praised

the film's masterful effects and willingness to push boundaries, audiences took issue with its violent content, supposed anti-social themes, and Jabbaz's status as a white director working in a foreign market. Chief among these was Giddens Ko (director of 2017's [Mon Mon Mon Monsters](#)), who called it "dirty and cool" while also pointing out Jabbaz's (in his words) "cruel" execution. Now infecting the West, *The Sadness* may prove to be as potently polarizing abroad as it has been in its country of origin, but horror fans worldwide will find themselves taken with Jabbaz's inventively gory and provocative debut feature. *Rue Morgue* caught up with the writer/director/editor ahead of the North American release to discuss the film's strange journey from page to screen.

How did you end up in Taiwan, and what got the ball rolling on *The Sadness*?

Actually, back in 2008, I interviewed for a job out on Dufferin Street as the print editor of *Rue Morgue*! When I didn't get it, I was like, "What the hell am I going to do now?" I was doing a lot of graffiti at the time, and there was a friend of mine that was in Taiwan and he would post all these pictures on this message board of palm trees and scooters and really cool street art. Because I was still like 25 or 26, I was just like, "Who cares? I'll just go there and I'll figure it out." I went to Taiwan and tried to do this graffiti thing for a while. I was interested in documenting [it] because I had done a relatively successful video about freight train graffiti within the scene, but I abandoned that project and for the next three years, I worked doing what every white guy does here — teaching English to little kids. During that time, I taught myself how to animate with After Effects and Cinema 4D, and made some short films. Eventually, [this] guy who I was doing freelance for was like, "Hey, man. You want to come to lunch? I'm meeting a friend of mine [Jeffrey Huang] who used to be a pop star in Taiwan." I was like, "Is he paying for lunch? Sure. Let's go." His whole family was at this restaurant, his mom, his dad, everyone. They were all speaking English, talking like Americans, right? [We] started talking about movies, and then two weeks later, [Jeffrey] called me to have lunch again. All we did was talk for literally two hours about movies, sci-fi, books, and stuff like that. I think he just kind of got a kick out of me or something. I don't think he ever got to talk with anyone who was that big of a nerd. He goes, "Hey, man, I'm trying to write a script. Have you ever written a script? I want to write something about zombies, I want it to take place in a facility like in *Resident Evil*." [His idea was] certain math equations that can't be understood drive people crazy or something. I literally spent eight months trying to write that script, but the pandemic rolled out and sure enough, Taiwan handled it. Borders were closed and they used big data and stuff that, in America, they would feel is sort of infringing upon human



Terror In Taiwan: Praised for its over-the-top gore effects but condemned for its explicit violence, Rob Jabbaz's *The Sadness* has polarized critics in its country of origin.

rights. They would use your metadata to find out where you were and insist that you do a quarantine, and then you have a "Lijiang," which is like a community leader [who] is in charge of all the guys in the quarantine: giving them a call every day, making sure that they're still there and that they're fine, taken care of and whatnot. Taiwan's really good at having big government but having smaller and smaller levels working. I think because SARS was handled so well in 2006, the COVID pandemic was pretty much just handled right from the beginning, and our situation [became], "We can make a movie and no one else can because Hollywood's shut down."

At that point, the concept for your script changed entirely, and you turned to Garth Ennis for inspiration. What drew you to his

comic book series, *Crossed*?

It's exactly the same thing as a *28 Days Later* zombie movie, except that [the zombies] also want to fuck you and enjoy what they're doing. But the problem with *Crossed*—and this is something that I found when I was reading [it], is that they're not thinking enough. It would be so much better if [the zombies] were talking. It came out so long ago and Garth Ennis has been optioned so often, with [Preacher](#) and [The Boys](#) and all that stuff, [but] it's too dark. It's too rape-y and it's too hardcore for a big audience. Then I thought — I'll just make this movie and I'll try to tap into what I like about *Crossed* but even more, I'll try to address the things that I don't like about [it], fix them, and make something that's my own thing. Make it more about [a] disease that gives power and purpose to people who in the past felt

**"THERE'S NEVER BEEN
A MOVIE THIS BLOODY
BEFORE OUT OF TAIWAN,
EVER, AND THAT'S JUST
SHOCKING."**

DIRECTOR ROB JABBAZ

powerless. Kind of like, do you remember [in the Mouth of Madness](#), how there's a line in there where it's like, "If everybody went crazy, then the sane people would be the crazy people," or some stupid line like that? This is sort of the centre of the idea with the whole thing.

Were you at all reticent to make what is ostensibly a "zombie" movie since that subgenre has been thoroughly exhausted?

That was what I liked about *Crossed*, is that it added this new life to zombie movies, which is something that is sorely needed. We're so fucking sick of this shit. We need something. We need them to be able to think, and we need them to be able to fuck: that makes it fucking scary and makes it so people really feel unsafe.

It's difficult to get a film greenlit under normal circumstances. I imagine it's doubly so as a Canadian living in Taiwan. Do you think the film could actually have gotten made if the pandemic hadn't happened?

I think that [Jeffrey] just looked at it as a way to hedge his bets. He's an investor, a crypto guy. He's really into being aggressive in business, loves movies, and wants to make [them]. He has this idea that we have all this talent in Taiwan, why can't we have what Hollywood has? Why can't we make movies on that level? We kind of found out why after this movie came out, but in any case...

Why is that?

It's just... people here like a certain kind of movie. A movie made in Taiwan, about Taiwan, has to represent the country in a certain way, and if it goes against that, then the people feel like they've been... I don't want to say violated...

Insulted?

Yeah, insulted or shamed. I really don't like speaking on the Taiwanese psyche, though I have been here for quite a long time. You're under the heel of China, you're not allowed into the UN or the WHO or any of these organizations. I think most people aren't really thinking about that consciously but how [the country] presents itself to the rest of the

world is in the back of their minds.

I guess it could be construed in some way that my movie – to me, it doesn't make any sense but – in my movie, a lot of people think that I'm making Taiwanese people look bad or making them look like terrible people or something, but it's a virus that does it. It's a fantastic element that changes people from being good into being shitty people, evil people. Another thing is that there's never been a movie this bloody before out of Taiwan, ever, and that's just shocking. I've heard so many stories of people leaving the theatre, people vomiting in the theatre. I've had people say that it's the most disgusting movie ever made, in a bad way. Those ones are awesome. All that stuff that you love hearing as a director but not as an investor because I am invested in the movie too. [But] at the end of the day, how often does a director get to do something like this? [I told Jeffrey], "I'll do it on two conditions: that you let me do it exactly the way that I want it, and that I get final cut." It was a pretty great situation. The only limitation was my own. And the budget, really, that's it.

You started writing this version of what became The Sadness during the pandemic, and much of it feels pulled from the headlines. How did you comment on the situation without making it too on-the-nose?

I just tried to make it relevant. This movie sort of features a fictional government in Taiwan. I based it on the president that was before our current president. That was a time when Taiwan actually didn't trust the government. There were protests all the time and the government didn't seem to have the people's best interests in mind. If there had been a pandemic at that time, they would have allowed the virus to take hold in Taiwan. We had to kind of create a cautionary tale: what if things were different?





“THIS IS THE LAST PLACE IN THE CHINESE-SPEAKING WORLD WHERE WE CAN MAKE A MOVIE LIKE THIS – WHERE WE CAN DO LITERALLY WHATEVER WE WANT.”

DIRECTOR ROB JABBAZ

As a Western viewer, watching people's worst impulses being loosed, it's hard not to notice a connection to seemingly average North Americans behaving abominably as of late, whether it be storming the U.S. capitol or verbally assaulting minimum-wage workers for upholding mask mandates.

I was trying to make something that would really get under the skin of people here, and the way to get there was to make the film take place in a Taiwan that was a little more like America. Taiwanese films have this sort of hero who has a humble, quiet bravery. He keeps his head down, he sticks it out, he allows himself to be trodden upon and, in the end, he doesn't always win but he does the right thing. It makes so much sense when you think about the political situation. There's a mentality [that] if you just mind your own business and you don't bother anybody and you just keep your mouth shut and just work hard and do your thing, you'll be fine. That's not the case now. People will attack you and try to do terrible things to you for no reason. The idea of an unprovoked mass killing... there was actually one that happened in 2014 in Taiwan. It took place on the MRT, the subway. There's a

scene in my movie where it's almost the same thing, [and] that's entirely intentional. I wanted to shock people. I think that probably put people against me, but at the same time, this is the last place in the Chinese-speaking world where we can make a movie like this – where we can do literally whatever we want. Maybe [I'm] the stupid Canadian foreigner who did something clumsily and accidentally broke down a wall. Some Taiwanese filmmakers, it's like they've been waiting for [this] movie.

Speaking of getting under people's skins: the gore is so beautifully staged and viscerally effective, it's not surprising to hear that you storyboarded everything. Did that arise out of necessity?

So, there are no really bloody movies in Taiwan – how do you find the right effects team if there's no resume out there? I found IF SFX Art Maker, [they do] really high-level work, but the only stuff that they'd ever done was, like, fingers getting cut off or whatever. I told them "I want you guys to be like the Rob Bottin of *The Thing* and I'll be the John Carpenter." I wanted them to feel like they had a lot of freedom and autonomy and I

wanted them to kind of come up with their own stuff, [but] I found that they're just not built that way. They're mercenaries, they take instruction. [So], every single effect was storyboarded.

Horror fans often feel like they've seen it all, but you've devised some cruelly inventive tortures – the first that comes to mind involves a light pole. Where did those come from?

I'll tell you exactly where it comes from: that's an old Taiwanese kids' prank, it's a very local thing. They call it "aluba." You grab your pal and you smash his nuts into a pole. That's what they do around here if you're like, fourteen, but without the barbed wire.



That was the good thing about teaching English for those couple years, because it's different in different parts of the world, right, like stupid shit that kids do? That just came to me to amp it up to make it into something ghastly. These audiences appreciate that too. Whenever I watch it with Taiwanese dudes, when they see that part, they're like, "Hell yeah!" They recognize it for what it is. I didn't even mention that we translated the script from English to Chinese and then also to Hokkien, which is the sort of [ancestral] language that people curse in. [Our characters] curse in that language because we wanted it to hit harder with the local audience.

Western audiences have become pretty comfortable with gore, but I believe *The Sadness* will remain controversial because of the inherent misogyny of some of its violence. Do you believe that, at the most primal level, all men want to bash women's brains in?

Here's my explanation. I guess, it's just the — you have to think about what's the worst thing that you can think of doing. I've never really gotten a good answer from people who are really against sexual violence in the media. If you frame it as bad, then it's bad. Like what the fuck? But then [if] you get into sort of male gaze territory, "Oh, well, you say, it's bad but there's sort of a salaciousness to what you're presenting here," I totally understand that. That's actually a problem that I had with a lot of the violence that was in *Possessor* from last year. It didn't offend me or anything, I didn't think it was problematic in any way, but I just felt like it kind of hurt the film because it was celebratory in a way that I felt didn't really make sense. I just tried to handle it as tastefully as I could. I tried to give it care, I needed it to be there because I needed it for the movie to be scary in the way that I wanted it to be. I want this not to feel like a joke at all. I want this to feel like the most horrible thing you've ever seen.

That's also why the movie works so well, because gore is one thing, but sex really gets under people's skin.

The sex is kind of a means to get there but what it really is is just like malice, true sadism, right? Trying to hurt someone and enjoying it. That's the ultimate act of sadism and [if] you're actually getting sexual pleasure from it in the most direct way, it achieves a certain level of ghastly horror.

There are so many bodies onscreen and *The Sadness* seems to boast a pretty large cast. How



Gore Decor: A Canadian working abroad, filmmaker Rob Jabbaz brought North American sensibilities to *The Sadness*, storyboarding every practical effect and gore scene.

well do you speak the language to direct your actors?

My Chinese is serviceable. I should be fluent, I'm not. Right from the get-go, there was an understanding that my assistant director was going to have to do a lot of the communication. We got Schiele Lee, who [worked] on *Silence*, which was the Martin Scorsese movie that was shot in Taiwan. Sometimes, there's a production that's financed by foreign money, a director will come and shoot in Taiwan, and they'll need that exact job. They'll need that guy who can speak Chinese and English perfectly and be able to sort of coordinate. So, that skill set was already just available.

What was your working relationship like with your leads?

When I first met [Berant Zhu], I didn't like him. I

thought he was just too aloof, kind of acting like he didn't want to be there, or he was doing me a favour for being there. But then I realized that it wasn't aloofness, it was more this introverted-ness, this sort of artistic, very sensitive, emotional kind of thing. [From] the first day [of shooting] he was killing it. He was really summoning feelings that, if you watch a Taiwanese movie, you'll find that the acting style is not naturalistic at all. He didn't want to bring it back to the sort of overexaggerated theatre acting that they do a lot here. He's young. He's 21 or something. He was just doing a really good job. Then [Regina Lei], we had a hard time casting. I wanted a little more of an Ellen Ripley type, but then when we cast Berant, he was so much younger that it didn't make any sense to have this much-older girl. We went through so many girls and then finally, Regina came in. She just had this look where I felt like

I'd be scared if anything bad happened to her or something like that, you know what I mean? The actress who plays Molly [Ying-Ru Chen], what a talent she is as well. I really wish that we could have given her more lines, but we had to cut them in order to keep pacing. She's a real selfless actress. And [Tzu-Chiang Wang], the [villainous] businessman character, what a fucking righteous dude that guy is. He just got the movie like nobody else did. I think a lot of the younger actors looked up to him and he would often give advice and help them a lot. He got the character and then he added to the character. There are these moments where he kind of just darkens then becomes almost like a demigod, like some kind of evil god or something. He has this crazy intense, big presence. I didn't write that. I wanted him to be more like the Joker and Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, but he brought this dark intensity to the character and I was like, "We're going with that." I showed what he was doing to the composers and it totally re-contextualized everything. That's what happens when you have a creative performer and a creative sound guy and a director and writer like me, when we all can kind of understand what it should feel like, but we can still kind of juggle it around. I'm an animator by trade, so most of the stuff that I do is all by myself; I'm not really used to working with people very often. When you spend a lot of time doing stuff by yourself, you think that you're the only one who knows how to do something, but the making of *The Sadness* really opened my eyes. There are a lot of situations where people can add something that you didn't think of, and then that creates a synergy where you just get an idea growing by itself under its own power.

You spoke a little bit about the chilly reception of the film in Taiwan, but has it been financially successful?

No, not at all. I think that's just a combination of factors. One of them is that it was under-marketed. The marketing team, they didn't really get the film. We screened it for them and they straight up were just like, 'No, we don't like it.' That was the biggest problem: nobody knew about the movie. Then you've also got to expect a divisiveness. You have to expect it to make people really upset. Generally speaking, people who get upset about a movie tend to be more active online, because it's so easy for them to just go on IMDb and vote it down. We look at the metrics of *The Sadness*, and there's just so many people giving it the lowest rating possible for reasons like I mentioned before. People just feel like, "This is not a Taiwanese movie," and "This is directed by some fucking foreigner who's not from here. This is bullshit." A lot of feelings, a lot of hot feelings. Which is totally fine. I'm not going to be the guy who tries to claim racial discrimination. That's not something that I'm interested in doing. We don't really give a shit about being strategic at this point. I've already made peace



Slaughter Daughters: Kat (Regina Lei, top) and Molly (Ying-Ru Chen) run for their lives from the sudden onslaught of vicious sexual violence.

with the money that I've lost. We just [want to] fucking crush and win awards and then laugh at all these people who didn't embrace it when it first came out. Then they're going to turn around and say that they love it and they'll embrace it as a Taiwanese film; everyone in Taiwan is going to be so proud that their homegrown movie did so well abroad. I love this country so much [and] I don't want to sound like I'm adversarial with the people here. It's just like setting up a kissing booth and then nobody wants to kiss me. It's like – I spent so much money making this kissing booth, I bought all this lumber!

Taiwan deserves good horror movies too! Exactly. I didn't want to make the craziest movie

that's ever been made here, I wanted to make the craziest and most intense horror movie of the year worldwide and I want everyone to be like, "What country did this come from," and have everybody look to the Taiwanese film industry. I didn't take any of the cultural stuff into account, I just did the thing that I wanted to do. I lost my studio a lot of money and released a film that, hopefully, will still leave a mark on the world or at least the horror scene in some capacity. Like I said before: I don't consider myself to be the guy who's breaking through barriers. I consider myself to be the guy who got drunk and accidentally fell through the fence. 🍷



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IT'S BEEN FOUR YEARS SINCE WE LOST A TITAN OF THE HORROR GENRE, BUT 2021 PROMISES TO BE THE YEAR WHEN, LIKE THE ZOMBIES OF HIS MANY FILMS, **GEORGE A. ROMERO** COMES BACK

NEVER DEAD

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD

WHEN GEORGE A. ROMERO DEPARTED THIS MORTAL COIL IN JULY 2017, HE LEFT BEHIND A LEGACY THAT IS ARGUABLY UNPARALLELED IN THE REALM OF HORROR. It's safe to say that without [Night of the Living Dead](#), the genre as we know it today wouldn't exist; echoes of Romero's 1968 masterpiece are everywhere, in subject matter, thematic approach, and practical inspiration. Yet despite this and the success of his 1979 sequel [Dawn of the Dead](#), Romero struggled throughout his career to get his visions on screen, never finding the acceptance of a Hollywood that, particularly in the last two decades, cannibalized his oeuvre much like one of his hungry ghouls.

Suzanne Desrocher-Romero, who was married to the filmmaker from 2011 until his passing, recalls one eye-opening moment from their time together.

"We were playing *Scrabble*, which we did a lot of, and I asked him casually what he thought his legacy was, and he basically said, 'Nobody really cares.' I was stunned by that answer, and I didn't say anything, and we just moved on. I think he was of course grateful for having a career, because that's hard in this business, but I believe he would have liked to have had a more diverse career. It was very difficult for him to get people to fund his ideas and his scripts, and he was really frustrated by the fact that he had done these films, and he still had to go and pitch and do all the stuff you have to do to get a movie made, and he hated that.

"I was taken aback by that answer because when I would go with him to events and conventions, he was truly revered," she continues. "It was actually staggering to me, because there was my George, the normal George, and then there was the iconic George, which was a very different situation. So when he passed, those words kept haunting me, and I was thinking they definitely weren't true. That's when I came up with this foundation, because I was determined to make sure his legacy mattered."

Thus was born the [George A. Romero Foundation](#), a Pittsburgh-based nonprofit devoted to both honouring the director's legacy and encouraging a new generation of independent filmmakers.

"We really want to inspire young people, and anybody who wants to pick up a camera and learn about

the craft of making a film, and do it in the horror genre," Desrocher-Romero says. "That's what happens in independent filmmaking: you have an idea, you write a script, you have a bunch of kids or people you want to hang out and make this movie with – like George did in 1967. It takes courage, so we're trying to be supportive and give them a helping hand, and provide them an avenue to do their work, to practice their art."

To that end, the GARF has teamed up with Salem Horror Fest to provide up-and-coming fright filmmakers the opportunity to be mentored by such experienced directors and producers as [Mynette Louie](#) (*Swallow, Black Box*), [Travis Stevens](#) (*Jakob's Wife, Girl on the Third Floor*), and [Jenn Wexler](#) (*The Ranger, Depraved*). They intend to set up a short-film contest as well, and have established scholarship programs with Pittsburgh's Douglas Education Center. In addition, the GARF and the University of Pittsburgh are establishing the George A. Romero Horror Studies Center, shepherded by professor Adam Lowenstein.

"He and I are trying to connect with scholars all over the world," Desrocher-Romero says. "I love the idea of people studying George's work, and having a growing archive. When he passed, it became obvious that his work had to be protected and housed and curated, and the idea is for the university to be a centre for his and other horror works."

"George's archive is a cornerstone of the Horror Studies collection, but it has grown," adds GARF COO Jeff Whitehead. "They've recently acquired material from Linda Addison, who's a five-time Bram Stoker Award winner, and they've secured material from Daniel Kraus [a Guillermo del Toro collaborator who completed Romero's unfinished novel *The Living Dead*] and numerous others. We want to continue building the collection from other horror luminaries and other avenues of the genre – literature and art and things like that outside of film."

Another GARF project is its annual Pioneer Award, whose honorees have similarly begun within Romero's world (the first two were given posthumously to Pittsburgh horror host and *Night* bit player Bill Cardille and the '68 film's star [Duane Jones](#)) and will broaden beyond it in future years.

"We gave Duane's award to his sister Marva Brooks, which was a very touching moment," Whitehead says.

The award was sculpted by artist Christian Stavrakis, who oversees the Foundation's visual aspects as well as its quarterly newsletter (which you can sign up for at thegarf.org).

"Working with the Foundation has been a dream come true in many ways," he says. "It's extremely gratifying to put my knowledge of Romero minutiae to use in the most appropriate way possible. Now that I'm a bit older, I can filter George's works through my own matrix of accumulated experience, and thus approach him and his work from an entirely new – and in some ways more rewarding – perspective."

Among Stavrakis' recent projects were graphics for a 40th-anniversary celebration of Romero's [Knightriders](#), a multipart livecast that welcomed actors Ed Harris and Patricia Tallman and composer Donald Rubinstein, among others. These segments were part of the GARF Network, an ongoing podcast series the Foundation set up when COVID restrictions made live events impossible last year. It's an outgrowth of WGON Radio, which hosts Matt Blazi and Eric Kent first launched in 2017.

"When Eric and I started WGON Radio," Blazi says, "we set out to tell stories about those who worked with George that many folks might not have had the opportunity to hear. As lifelong fans, we enjoyed not just George's films, the casts, and crews, but also the community they created. When Suz called asking if we'd like to come aboard and help promote the GARF's mission, we jumped at the



chance. Now we have the opportunity to continue our original vision of celebrating George's work and legacy, while reaching out to fans of independent horror that people grew up loving. Our goal is to continually bring new content, engaging the fans and creators of our favourite independent films so that they can be discovered, rediscovered, and cherished for generations."

Arguably the coolest of all of the GARF's projects so far is its restoration of Romero's formerly lost 1973 movie [The Amusement Park](#). The 53-minute film was commissioned by the Lutheran Society, who were seeking a vehicle to raise awareness of ageism; what they got was a remarkably bleak study of a septuagenarian (Lincoln Maazel,

who would later play Tata Cuda in Romero's *Martin*) whose day at the titular attraction becomes a nightmare of abuse and humiliation. Not a horror film *per se*, it is nonetheless a harrowing viewing experience that's very much recognizable as the director's work; the crowds who assault Maazel's character or swarm dispassionately around him sometimes seem like analogues of the *Night of the Living Dead* ghouls.

The Amusement Park went unseen for decades until a good friend of Romero's mentioned that he had a 16mm copy of the film.

"He brought it over to the house," Desrocher-Romero recalls, "and he and I and George and a few intimates watched it. Afterward, we were



ONE OF **GEORGE A. ROMERO'S** MOST NOTORIOUS UNMADE PROJECTS GETS A KICKSTART

THE DARKEST DEAD

By **MICHAEL GINGOLD**

SOME ESPECIALLY EXCITING NEWS FROM THE GEORGE A. ROMERO FOUNDATION: a previously unrealized movie project called *Twilight of the Dead*, intended to close out the director's undead saga and originated by Romero himself, is moving closer to production. Seeking backing and a filmmaker to helm it at press time, *Twilight* has its origins in a conversation between Romero and author/filmmaker Paolo Zelati, who got to know the zombie master while interviewing him for his book *American Nightmares*.

"I was on holiday in Florida with George and Suzanne [Desrocher-Romero]," Zelati recalls. "One evening, after dinner, I was discussing George's

Dead saga with him and, as a fan, brought up my need to see more. I asked him, 'Where do the zombies go at the end of *Land of the Dead*?' George looked at me and said, 'You tell me.' So I did, and from there we spent five days talking and created the whole story, ending included. George was extremely excited, and every morning he would tell me, 'Man, I really think we have something here!'"

After their treatment was completed, Romero began work on the script, but died before he could complete it. Zelati was devastated and didn't want to continue without him, at first.

"I CAME UP WITH [THE GEORGE A. ROMERO FOUNDATION] BECAUSE I WAS DETERMINED TO MAKE SURE HIS LEGACY MATTERED."

SUZANNE DESROCHER-ROMERO



Life After Death: The George A. Romero Foundation is committed to preserving the filmmaker's legacy through a variety of programs, including archives, film fests, and scholarships.

like, 'George! You never, ever mentioned this film in any of your interviews' (and my goodness, he's been interviewed!). And he said, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was a three-day job, it was nothing.' And I said, 'But it's something!' He always said he never really had a footprint, but he totally did, and this movie had George all over it. So after he passed, and we were in the process of finding our path with the Foundation, I thought, 'Let's see if we can restore this film.' We hired Sandra Schulberg at IndieCollect, a wonderful person who works hard at saving old independent movies, to do the restoration."

A long-time producer/supporter of independent cinema and acquaintance of Romero's, Schulberg recalls that after Desrocher-Romero first approached her about *The Amusement Park*, "We went down this fascinating rabbit hole trying to figure out how this film had been made, whether it had been released, the whole back story. There was very little information that was publicly available about it. Unfortunately, many of the people who were involved with it were no longer around, though the producer, Karl Rabeneck, was and he was able to give Suzanne some insight into the film, and help her better understand the terms under which George made it. This was definitely a work-for-hire for George, even though he made it very much his own."

Schulberg and the IndieCollect team, including colourists Anastasia Cipolla and Oskar Miarka, did sterling work getting *The Amusement Park* back into visual shape – especially considering that only two prints were available.

"And they were in really terrible condition," Schulberg says. "We try to restore everything from the original negative, but sometimes, as was the case with *The Amusement Park*, that has been lost along the way. If the negative is not available, we try to work with an interpositive, which is the next generation, or the internegative. The least desirable element is a print, but sometimes that's all you have to work with, and that was the case with *The Amusement Park*. Suzanne was lucky to find any

"Suzanne made me change my mind," he says. "She's the real force behind this project. She told me the story was too good and we had to finish it, for George. I immediately agreed and asked Joe Knetter and Robert Lucas to help me complete the script."

Lucas, co-director of the documentary [One for the Fire: The Legacy of 'Night of the Living Dead'](#) and a producer on Tom Savini's segment of [The Theatre Bizarre](#), agreed that the script appears to follow the trajectory of the series with the ghouls gaining more consciousness.

"It definitely supports the whole evolution of zombies from [Land of the Dead](#)," he affirms. "It gets more extreme than before, in the sense of George having Big Daddy getting smarter, and trying to create clans and rebuild society with them. *Twilight* kind of jumps into and elaborates on that, and there are some twists and turns that make you think it might be the end of mankind. It's a little like *Planet of the Apes* in that sense. How humans can exist is definitely in question in this one, if they will exist at all."

The eventual production of *Twilight of the Dead* will be a bittersweet situation for Desrocher-Romero.

"Obviously I would love for it to have been finished by George, but that's

not our reality," she says. "I am very protective of *Twilight*, because if it's not going to be done right, I'm not interested in getting it done at all. I want the right executive producer who can get me the right director, or the right director who can get us the money to make the film. It's about making sure that George's concepts and his work are protected."

She adds, "I'd say this one is the darkest of all the *Dead* films. There are funny bits, of course, but overall it's a very dark piece."

At the time of this interview, Desrocher-Romero says a few actors have already been in touch about being part of *Twilight*. There is also, needless to say, a wish list of filmmakers to be involved, including some of Romero's past collaborators.

"I think Tom Savini would be great, I think Edgar Wright would be great, I think Guillermo del Toro would be great," she says.

Time will tell (or may already have told by the time you read this), who will be guiding this culmination of the *Dead* series to the screen. Whatever the case may be, Zelati has a promise:

"The most important thing people should know is that this is 100 percent a George Romero movie. You might like it or not, but it's George's vision. And it ends the saga, both narratively and thematically." 🍷



Dark Ride: George A. Romero's previously unreleased *The Amusement Park* showcases the director's penchant for metaphor through an elderly man's nightmarish day at the fair.

"FINDING THE RIGHT PEOPLE REQUIRED A LOT OF SLEUTHING, BECAUSE [*THE AMUSEMENT PARK*] WAS MADE IN '73, AND NOBODY HAD ANY RECORDS."

SUZANNE DESROCHER-ROMERO

surviving elements, so we did our best. When we photograph each frame in 5K, we have a great deal of latitude to work with, but not an infinite amount.

"The two *Amusement Park* prints were both badly faded and discoloured in different ways and in different scenes, and we had no reference copy to tell us what George originally intended," she continues. "Our colourists are very skilled at deploying the available tools to try to recreate what the filmmaker originally shot, so by scanning both prints multiple times and then mixing and matching the best scans, knitting them all together into a new digital version, the colourists had a chance to do right by George. I think we were all relieved that we achieved as good a restoration as we did; there were moments in the process when we were worried that we might not be able to pull out and adjust the colour to what we thought George shot and wanted."

Just as challenging as restoring *The Amusement Park* was securing the appropriate rights so that the GARF team could get the movie back out into the world, starting with a debut screening at New York City's Museum of Modern Art in January 2020.

"Finding the right people required a lot of sleuthing, because the film was made in '73, and nobody had any records," Desrocher-Romero says. "It took almost two years to figure that out and finally get all our ducks in a row, so that we had the chain of title sorted, the music licensed, all the stuff you need to do to get a film distributed today. We shopped it around, and Sam Zimmerman at Shudder was interested, and we're super-happy that they picked it up."

Shudder, which began streaming *The Amusement Park* this summer, is certainly the ideal

home for an unearthed Romero work, though Desrocher-Romero wants to make sure that his devotees don't mistake it for his better-known movies.

"I was concerned about fans being disappointed that it isn't a zombie film, you know?" she says. "It's horrific, but it's not a traditional horror film. And then when Dan Kraus gave that quote that 'It's the scariest movie Romero ever made,' I said, 'Dan, hold on! That's gonna set expectations that I'm not sure we're up for.' So I've always been cautious to let people know that this is definitely a Romero film, it has his sensibilities, and it's horrific in its subject matter, but it's not a horror film."

"I was also wondering if potential buyers would be worried about that," she continues. "But you know what they were worried about? They didn't love that it's 53 minutes! They were like, 'Wow...it's only that long?' I was like, 'Yeah, but that's what it is. I can't make it longer! This is a discovery.' They said, 'So what are we gonna do with it?' I said, 'Listen, Romero fans are going to want to see it, whether it's 53 minutes or an hour and a half or twenty minutes. It is what it is.' I think they've gotten over it, but that was something that kept coming up."

Now, Romero's many fans can experience a part of his filmography that the majority of them likely never knew existed – and Whitehead counts himself among that group.

"I had never heard of *The Amusement Park*," he says. "When I went through school, there was

this myth of a lost Romero movie, this white whale that nobody knew existed, and no one had ever seen. And then as soon as I met Suzanne, she told me, 'Hey, George made this little film called *The Amusement Park*,' and I said, 'Oh my God, it's true!' [Laughs] 'This isn't a legend, it actually exists.' And once I saw it, I thought it really stands the test of time, because it's about aging back then, but you can easily extrapolate it to be about aging now. And while it's not the kind of pure horror you would expect to see in your typical genre movie, it's still pretty scary to think about how you will age, and how people will perceive you as you go through that natural life process. It's fascinating to watch."

Desrocher-Romero says she sees her late husband in *The Amusement Park* on two levels.

"First of all, I literally hear him in the film; he's doing a lot of the crowd noise in the background."

And I see George's legs everywhere, because they needed extras. I'm sure people will only recognize him in his cameo scene on the bumper cars, but he's all over the film; I see him in his shorts. And the movie has his edge, that social commentary that isn't hitting you over the head with words, but it definitely has an impact. It's the same thing in *Dawn of the Dead* with commercialism, or *Diary of the Dead* with social media: he's totally saying something in *The Amusement Park*, without it being preachy. He's just showing it to you. And that's George." 🍷





—HOTEL— PARANORMAL

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NIA DACOSTA'S CANDYMAN IS THE LATEST IN A SERIES
OF HORROR MOVIES TO BRING BACK AN ANCIENT
STORYTELLING TECHNIQUE

SHADOWSHOW

BY CARLY MAGA

In June 2020, almost a month into intense, widespread social unrest against anti-Black racism and violence sparked by the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others, director [Nia DaCosta](#) published a tweet: "[Candyman](#), at the intersection of white violence and black pain, is about unwilling martyrs. The people they were, the symbols we turn them into, the monsters we are told they must have been."

As film promo often does, the tweet linked to a trailer for DaCosta's 2021 "reimagining" of Bernard Rose's 1992 supernatural slasher [Candyman](#) — co-written by Jordan Peele, DaCosta, and Win Rosenfeld — which is finally getting its painfully delayed release this August (after you know what) with Peele's Monkeypaw Productions. But this video clip was far from a recut of

the original theatrical trailer of DaCosta's film released four months prior, which hinted at expanding the myth of Candyman from a single vengeful ghost to an urban legend that jumps between individuals and across generations. This trailer was an entirely different mood, style, and narrative — an artistic short film that can stand on its own, telling four distinct stories of violence against Black boys and men across history, culminating in the legend of Candyman himself — utilizing an ancient, analog method of storytelling largely forgotten in the age of digital filmmaking: shadow puppetry.

The colour is muted, and the cut-outs are relatively crude and solid — in some moments, you can even see the hands and strings manipulating the paper puppets from behind the transparent scrim. The effect is handmade and childlike, not what you'd expect from one of the most anticipated re-

makes in recent years. But this is also why shadow puppetry is the ideal vessel to drive home DaCosta's vision for the *Candyman* story in the Black Lives Matter era; this is not a movie about one isolated figure of neighbourhood cultural lore, this is a story contextualized by a pattern of violence with a long legacy.

"The way Nia described it to me, this is a movie about storytelling," says Drew Dir, co-founder of the Chicago-based performance company [Manual Cinema](#), which was brought on board by Monkeypaw to handle *Candyman*'s use of shadow puppetry. "The story of the original *Candyman* movie is told over and over again in this version, and it evolves depending on who's telling it. They wanted a mode of storytelling that would evoke myth, folk tales, and urban legends – very old storytelling. And this was key: Nia wanted it to feel like it was a community that was telling the story. The imagery should almost feel ritualistic or ceremonial, and made by a group of people, not just one person."

It was a natural conclusion, then, that the film would use shadow play to capture the mood of that kind of narrative – something basic, beautiful and timeless. And with the production's intention to work with artists and industries based in Chicago – the city is central to the story of *Candyman*, in particular the neighbourhood of Cabrini Green – Manual Cinema was an obvious partner. Since 2010, Manual Cinema has combined live actors, music, and shadow play (with the incredibly advanced technology of elementary school-style overhead projectors) into a hybrid of live theatre and film, telling original stories as well as horror classics like *A Christmas Carol*, *Hansel and Gretel*, and *Frankenstein*.

Though Manual Cinema has been approached by film projects before, it's never had an instant "Yes" to a partnership like it did with Monkeypaw's *Candyman*, but their collaboration was limited at first, used only in flashbacks within the story. You can see a glimpse of Manual Cinema's *Candyman* work in the original trailer: a split-second image of the hook-handed spectre, his ribcage illuminated beneath pinhole eyes, standing in a gap between the broken wood and pipe of a crumbling building. The idea for shadow puppetry to become a bigger presence, even a terrifying standalone trailer, evolved naturally to draw the line between the fictional story of Anthony ([Yahya Abdul-Mateen II](#)), a painter living in Cabrini Green in DaCosta's film, and historical names like James Byrd, Jr., who was murdered by three white supremacists in Texas in 1998, and George Stinney Jr., the youngest person ever to be executed after being coerced into confessing to a double murder.

"As we worked with [Monkeypaw] over the course of the year, we just kept adding and adding more material," said Dir, who also directed Manual Cinema's *Candyman* trailer. "There's a reference to this history of trauma that has produced all these iterations of Candyman, but it



Long Shadow: Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* utilizes an ancient and powerful form of storytelling that's been employed across cultures for generations.

was only spoken about in dialogue, for the most part. We and Nia and Jordan, I think we all realized there's a huge opportunity here to visualize some of these stories."

The clash between an ancient form of storytelling and modern cinema, as well as between a simple, childlike art form and such horrifying (yet true) stories of violence may sound unique to *Candyman*, but shadow play has made several recent appearances in horror from all corners of the world.

It plays a significant role in 2019's *Impetigore*, written and directed by Indonesian filmmaker Joko Anwar. In it, the traditional Indonesian form of shadow puppetry called *waylan kulit* is connected to a curse that haunts

an entire village, causing every baby to be born without skin. In one scene, the main character Maya (Tara Basro), hunted by villagers who believe her death will end the curse, encounters a waylan kulit performance – involving a team of performers, ornate and intricately detailed puppets, and a large

live band on Indonesian instruments – to later discover that the skin of three murdered girls was turned into waylan kulit puppets.

Shadow puppetry also appears in the 2019 Swedish film *Koko-di Koko-da* written and directed by

Johannes Nyholm, also conjuring themes of folklore, childhood death, and cyclical trauma. The film itself is a nightmarish time loop where three menacing fairy tale characters encounter,





and kill, two bereaved parents on a camping trip to save their marriage, while sections of shadow puppetry tell a parallel story of two bunnies mourning the death of their child.

Meanwhile, this year Criterion celebrated the works of [Lotte Reiniger](#), the German filmmaker who pioneered shadow puppetry as a cinematic force in the 1920s. She also pulled from legends and fables (from her first feature *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* to several *Dr. Dolittle* shorts to the 1934 anti-Nazi horror *The Stolen Heart*), giving them the sombre, eerie, anachronistic atmosphere that comes from this combination of handmade objects, shadow, light, and human movement that stretches across North America, Europe, Southeast Asia, and beyond.

“Almost every culture has produced some tradition of shadow puppetry,” says Dir. “But also, every one of us has a relationship to shadows that starts when we’re very young and we first see our shadow, and we realize we can manipulate our shadow, that’s also a double of ourselves – it connects with people on a very deep level. Watching a shadow play is sort of like being in a dream in the way going to the cinema is like being in a dream. They’re both illusions of light and shadow that we enjoy together as a collective. So there’s an affinity between cinema and shadow play that also goes back a long way.”

And in horror, shadow puppetry plays an even more complex role, artistically and psychologically. Much like practical effects in film or theatre, the movement of real objects conveys a visceral effect impossible by digital renderings. And in puppetry especially, the illusion of an object moving on its own implies an unnatural force at work – that’s doubled when there’s a voice involved or we’re in the uncanny valley. Even when it’s not explicitly horrific, the creepy factor of puppets has led to the coining of the term “pupaphobia.”

But when shadow puppetry is evoked as a storytelling method, its impact goes beyond the visceral. It calls to mind the vulnerability of child-



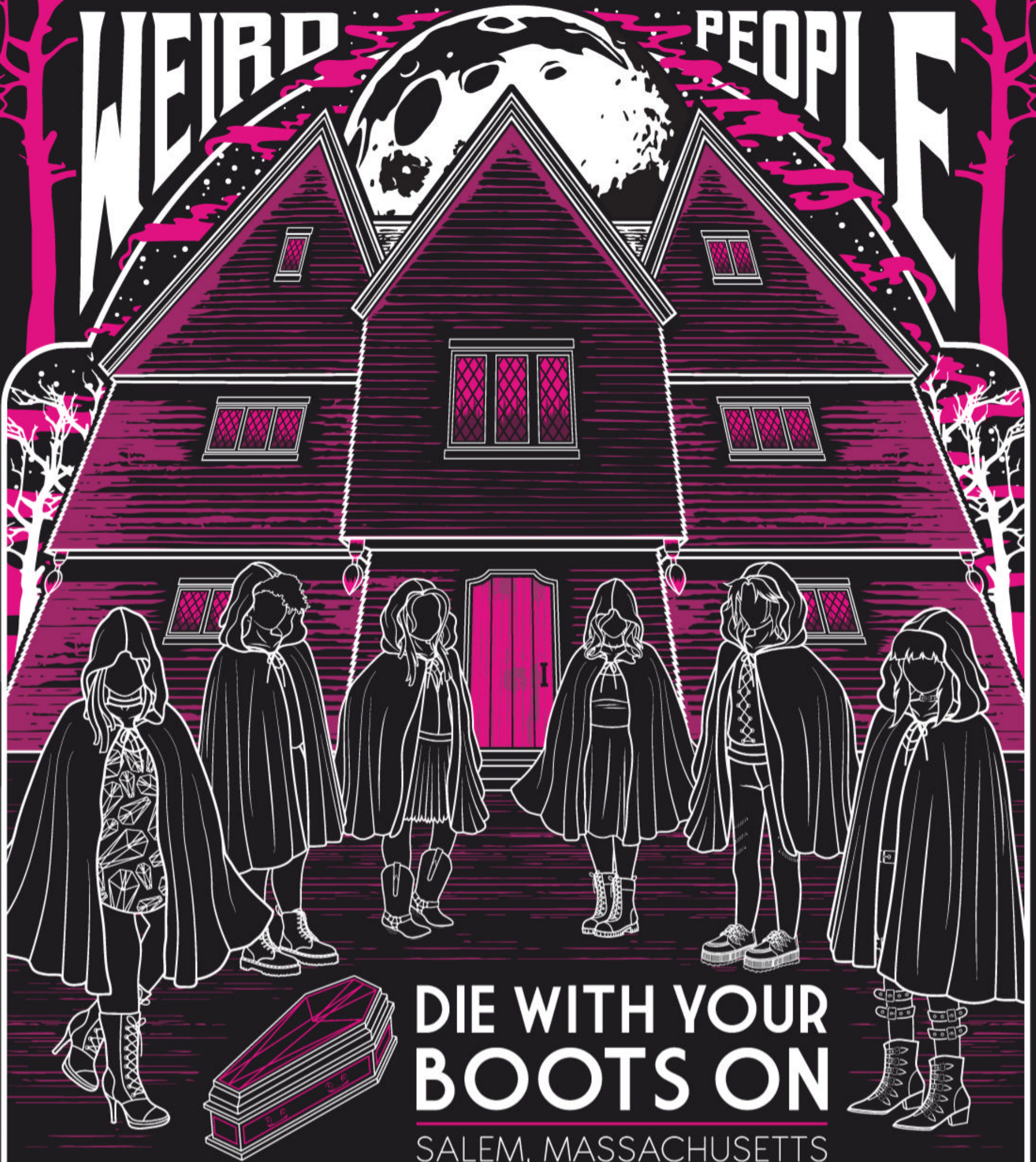
hood, the innocence of play and fairy tales, and the handmade nature of craft – and opens up a channel for a scare to hit deeper.

“For most people, it’s a children’s medium,” says Dir. “There is a lightness to puppetry, espe-

cially shadow puppetry. It’s funny to watch shadow puppets move in their weird ways. When you pair that with content that is really traumatic and has really dark roots to the real world, that’s a special kind of friction that is really exciting.” 🧛

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A NEW BOOK FROM FORMER RMEIC **DAVE ALEXANDER** TRACKS DOWN THE GENRE'S HEAVYWEIGHTS TO UNCOVER THE GREATEST HORROR MOVIES NEVER MADE

WHEN THERE'S NO MORE ROOM IN DEVELOPMENT HELL

BY RYAN COLEMAN

THERE COMES A TIME IN EVERY HORROR FAN'S LIFE WHEN THEY START ASKING QUESTIONS. Didn't David Cronenberg take out a full page ad in *Variety* trying to get a *Frankenstein* adaptation off the ground? Is *Bubba Nosferatu* ever going to get made? What about that William Gibson-penned *Alien 3* script? Will that ever see the light of day? Against the current, the ghosts of horror movies never made linger on, borne ceaselessly from the past.

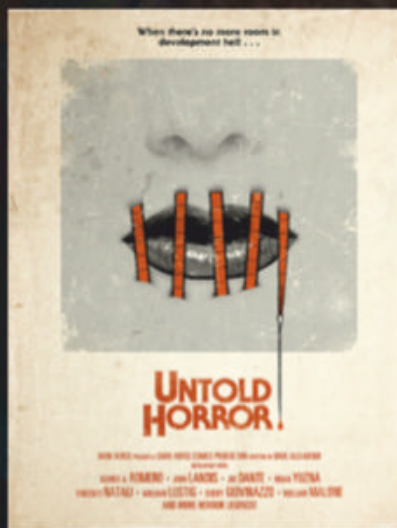
For these inquiring minds, a new book on the greatest unmade, half made, and perpetually in development genre films has arrived, rich with visuals and packing remarkable depth of research. Out August 17 from Dark Horse Books, *Untold Horror* spans ten decades, at least four continents, and countless seasons of this industry oubliette across its 150 pages.

But *Untold Horror* does more than tell the stories of how writers and directors as diverse as Brian Yuzna and James Whale hit a bump on the road to shooting, began to skid, and crashed into "development hell," as the book's subtitle puts it. In aggregate, the thirteen distinct oral histories pieced together in *Untold Horror*,

from Tobe Hooper's *White Zombie* to the dramatic, globe-trotting saga of the failed production *Worst Case Scenario*, illuminate larger truths about the business of filmmaking that transcend genre and generation. On one hand, the picture that *Untold Horror* paints of the industry is one of remarkable, unchanging conservatism — a gilded cage whose lone operating directive seems to be a hostility to creativity, while housing some of the most creative artists who ever lived. On the other, the book functions like a survival guide, anatomizing the creative, professional, and financial decisions that miraculously, when it was possible, broke the lock.

The project was born in 2015 at Montreal's Fantasia Film Festival, when former *Rue Morgue* Editor-in-Chief Dave Alexander and *Untold Horror* co-creator Mark Pollesel were in attendance.

"One night towards the end of the festival, we were feeling burnt out by all the parties," Alexander recalls. "We said, 'Let's the two of us go have a drink at some bar that won't be crowded.' We started talking about all the stuff we'd seen at past marketplaces, and we were like, 'What happens to all those films that don't



get made?’ What happens to all the movies that I hear about through *Rue Morgue*? Either a director mentions something in an interview and it never happens, or we do an article on something that gets announced and it never materializes. Why does that stuff happen? It’s like water cooler talk for horror fans.”

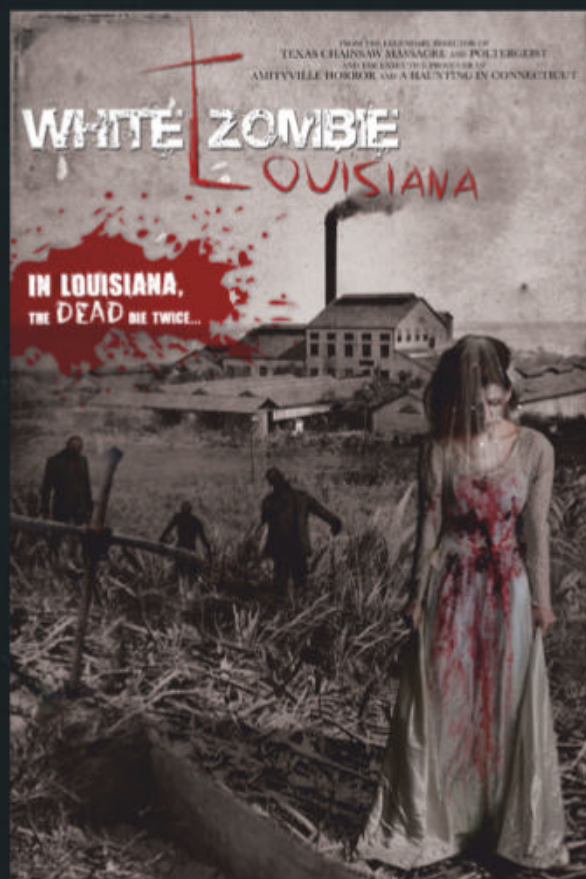
The duo started with one story they knew they wanted to tell – that of George A. Romero’s thwarted attempts to make the Marvel movie, *Copperhead*. Years before Marvel’s first foray into modern film licensing (1998’s *Blade*), the horror master was at work developing a “politically left”-leaning script about a “cyborg super-soldier” who rebels against his government handlers. Not only would Romero also have become the godfather of the megafranchise machine, he would have made *Robocop* before *Robocop*. The *Untold Horror* team managed to get the untold story in one of the last interviews Romero ever conducted before his passing in 2017.

“He was really passionate about *Copperhead*, because no one has ever asked him about it,” recalls Alexander. “In his career he wrote far more stuff that never got made then stuff that got made. He was sitting on something like 40 undeveloped scripts. The way that Romero did it, if something didn’t take off, he already had another story to tell. He loved to write. He genuinely enjoyed it. Even the periods in his career like the 1990s where he had almost nothing released, it was one of his most prolific periods as a writer. Nobody knew, but he was always creating.”

From that point, research began in earnest. A trickle of inspiration became a torrent of material, and the following year, *Untold Horror* was pitched as a TV docuseries akin to *Eli Roth’s History of Horror* at Fantasia’s Frontières marketplace. That modest TV pitch snowballed into a larger project, including live events and a feature film. Ironically enough, throughout its six-year gestation period, *Untold Horror* itself nearly entered the stalled-in-development graveyard, but it certainly wasn’t for lack of material.

“Once you open one door you find there’s at least three more doors behind it,” says Alexander. “There are an unlimited amount of untold horror stories. We’ve got over 30 interviews in the can, tons of B-roll. We were sitting on a mountain of never-before-seen images and concept art.”

As the project narrowed its focus, Dark Horse’s Mike Richardson got involved, and so began the possibility of a book. That introduced a strict criterion for curation – stories which could be accompanied with enough original art, from shots



What Could Have Been: *Untold Horror* contains a treasure trove of never-before-seen poster art and images of gore effects from genre efforts that never saw release.

of unused prosthetics and gore effects to death scene concept drawings that proved too expensive to execute, to unreleased poster mockups.

“There’s a whole level of work that went into the imagery in this book, from tracking down the provenance of a lot of these images to making sure they were cleared for us to use,” says Alexander. “What you see in each chapter is often a fraction of what we had to use.”

Two standout batches of imagery include the trove of surreal, post-human concepts that Swiss “biomechanical” artist H.R. Giger (best known for designing the xenomorph and guiding the overall look of *Alien*) developed for two unmade films by William Malone, and a suite of repulsive illustrations by Japanese manga artist Shintaro Kago for Vincenzo Natali’s *In The Tall Grass*, depicting grass people dismembering themselves into bloody pieces and birthing human babies out of their mouths.

But beyond the wistful what-ifs and the crushing too-bads, another editorial directive had a stronger hand in shaping *Untold Horror*, one that gets at the book’s most potent point for filmmakers and film fans alike.



“The driving principle behind this book is the diversity,” says Alexander. “What happens when you get lots of different subgenres, sizes of film, types of directors, and eras of

production together is that patterns emerge. You see that people have been struggling to make the kinds of movies that they wanted to make since the beginning of horror history, and for the same reasons. I think it speaks to the industry in a larger way, and it speaks to the creative spirit in a larger way.”

Indeed, moving through the book, from big-budget sequels overseen by superstar Hollywood producers on studio stages, to run-and-gun exploitation pickups in the jungles of the Philippines, things tend to fall apart again and again for the same reasons. The true bloody heart of *Untold Horror* is in its depiction of how filmmakers are able to push against the stupefying obstacles presented by many producers, executives, and financiers to see their projects to fruition. Should they resist anything that compromises on the style that made them famous (like Romero at the beginning of his career), or give in and try to be as creative as possible within the limits they’re prescribed (like Romero at the end of his career)? *Untold Horror* offers the full playbook, showing that though the industry may not have changed all that much over the years, horror filmmakers have always had to devise ever-new, ever-fascinating strategies for survival – and we remain grateful. 🧟

CINEMACABRE

FILM + DVD + REISSUES



SLEEPING WITH THE ENTITY

THE NIGHT HOUSE

Starring Rebecca Hall, Sarah Goldberg and Evan Jonigkeit
Directed by David Bruckner
Written by Ben Collins and Luke Piotrowski
Searchlight Pictures

Dealing with death is challenging, and it doesn't help that the omnipresent subject is as taboo as it is terrifying. Following up his well-received Netflix film *The Ritual*, director David Bruckner teams up with the screenwriting duo behind 2017's *Super Dark Times* for *The Night House*, which sets a bitter, grief-stricken protagonist against a foe she has no hope of defeating.

High school teacher Beth (Rebecca Hall, *Godzilla vs. Kong*) is grieving her husband Owen (Evan Jonigkeit) as best she can – packing up the stunning lakefront house he built for them and watching their home videos while working through a full case of brandy. But coping is hard, especially when Owen's suicide came seemingly out of

nowhere, leaving her with a cryptic suicide letter that makes her wonder if she knew her husband at all, and a home that's haunted in more ways than one. Plagued with nightmares and questionable dealings with other women who look suspiciously like her, every loose strand draws Beth deeper into a chilling mystery. Having survived a near-death experience of her own, Beth believes she knows what awaits after this life, but is Owen waiting for her on the other side or is something much more sinister at play?

A supernatural chiller with a surprising twist, *The Night House* winds in unexpected directions as it builds from the foundations of a conventional haunted house story to a darker rumination on the forces that lie beyond our ability to perceive. A strong performance from Rebecca Hall grounds the film's more outlandish aspects, and effective visual effects deliver the thrills as Beth's spacious home warps and closes in on her. Suspenseful and satisfying,

The Night House is well worth a visit.

ANDREA SUBISSATI



BREAK THE MOULD

GAIA

Starring Monique Rockman, Carel Nel and Alex van Dyk
Directed by Jaco Bouwer
Written by Tertius Kapp
Neon

It's safe to say that eco-horror is having a moment – from Neasa Hardiman's deep-sea creature feature *Sea Fever* to the fracking frights of last year's *Unearth*, there's plenty of horror to (ahem) mine from the continued abuse of our natural resources. Add to the list Jaco Bouwer's *Gaia*, which features a monstrous take on Mother Nature, bent on reclaiming the planet with the help of an environmentally zealous accomplice.

Park rangers Gabi (Monique Rockman) and Winston (Anthony Oseyemi) are on a routine surveillance mission into the deep wilderness via canoe when their drone goes down in the woods, prompting Gabi to go look for it. After snapping her leg in a trap, Winston follows her screams but winds up getting lost himself – and the woods are the least of his worries once darkness falls.

Gabi winds up under the care of white-man-



gone-wild Barend (Carel Nel) and his son Stefan (Alex van Dyk), who has lived his whole life off the grid. As she recovers, she realizes that something sinister lurks in the woods – a strain of fungus that transforms existing life forms into grotesque humanoid mushroom monsters. Gabi is free to leave but between her own exposure to the spores and Barend's questionable sanity, she must decide how to save Stefan.

Gabi and Barend make fascinating foes in that they both care deeply for the environment; their contrasting ideologies with regard to whether it's better to work within the system or against it give the film some philosophical insight into our increasingly politically polarized world. That's not to say all of *Gaia's* scares are cerebral, though; the fungal infection that's taken over the area is reminiscent of *Annihilation* in its hideous species-blending tableaux. Thoughtful and unique, *Gaia* is a welcome rumination on how best to listen to what the world might be telling us, especially when it's something we don't want to hear.

ANDREA SUBISSATI

ROYAL FLUSH

QUEEN OF SPADES

Starring Ava Preston, Daniel Kash and Kaelen Ohm
Directed by Patrick White
Written by John Ainslie
levelFILM

If you're going to remake a Russian horror film in English, it makes sense to pick one with a lot of room for improvement. *Queen of Spades: The Dark Rite* (2015) – about teenagers who unwittingly unleash the titular evil – was popular enough to warrant a sequel (2019's *Queen of Spades: Through the Looking Glass*) but hobbled by bad acting, a lacklustre script, and a monster that was only interesting if you'd never seen a horror movie before.

The Toronto-shot *Queen of Spades* casts Ava Preston (*I'll Take Your Dead*) as Anna, an urban

tween who spends more time with her friends than with her single mom. Her life quickly turns into a nightmare, though, when she invokes the spirit of the Queen of Spades – a Russian socialite who murdered dozens of children long ago – in a social media prank gone wrong. Soon, her friends start dying, and Anna's mother turns to a grieving parent (Daniel Kash: *Mama*), whose son was killed by the Queen, for help.

First-time director Patrick White does improve upon the original thanks to a strong cast and the poignant theme of parental neglect. (All of Anna's friends seem to live in an unsupervised, parentless world.) Preston impresses as the frustrated Anna, who seems particularly vulnerable to this supernatural invasion thanks to her hardworking mother's absence. It's the sort of social commentary that stings for those overworked and underpaid parents (like me) who too often let YouTube and Snapchat babysit their kids.

Unfortunately, White is hampered by a run-of-the-mill story and a female ghost whose malevolence is less than terrifying to anyone who has seen *Ringu*, *The Nun*, the *Insidious* films, or *The Woman in Black* remake. Bad CGI, pedestrian kills, and some questionable logic only add to the feeling that the *Queen of Spades* is dealing audiences a pretty lame hand.

SEAN PLUMMER



The Boy Behind the Door

ENDS TO THE FRIEND

THE BOY BEHIND THE DOOR

Starring Lonnie Chavis, Ezra Dewey and Micah Hauptman
Written and directed by David Charbonier and Justin Powell
Shudder

Debuting on Shudder on July 29, *The Boy Behind the Door* gets off to an attention-grabbing start that also alerts us the movie is going to deal with potentially troubling material. Those with a sensitivity to children in peril need not apply, though *The Boy Behind the Door* develops into a gripping and frightening film that successfully skirts exploitation.

Debuting writer/directors David Charbonier and Justin Powell (who went on to this summer's *The Djinn*) demonstrate a skill with atmosphere from the beginning. One moment, the sunny field where twelve-year-old best friends Bobby (Lonnie Chavis) and Kevin (Ezra Dewey) are tossing around a baseball feels safe and inviting; the next, it's isolated and foreboding. Ain't no sunshine after that, as the boys are abducted and trapped at a gloomy, remote home, with Kevin locked in an upstairs room and Bobby imprisoned in a car trunk. The latter escapes but refuses to leave his pal behind, venturing inside to begin a nerve-shredding cat-and-mouse game with their captors.



A ROB ZOMBIE FILM

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OVERLOOKED, FORGOTTEN AND DISMISSED

THIS ISSUE: LANCE TAKES THE RED PILL

BYO FACEMASK



SOCIAL DISTANCE

Koa Aloha Media

I love a good conspiracy theory – whether it's Elvis kidnapped by aliens from Area 51, JFK shot by Bigfoot, or those pesky microchips that Bill Gates wants to lodge into everyone's brains. In fact, as COVID-19 spread across planet Earth, I admit I revelled in the rampant speculation that seemed to overflow on people's social feeds like so much backed-up sewage. That's why I almost peed with glee at the sight of *Social Distance* sticking out of the RMHQ delete bin; a film that tells about the owners of a cruise ship line who learn that their boats might be responsible for unleashing the plague of the century. Though it looks like it was shot via Zoom, *Social Distance* does boast a cast led by the indomitable Jed Rowen (*Blind*, *Rat Scratch Fever*), who keeps things interesting with his deadpan wit and blow-up sex doll. If I was endowed with as much personal charm and sympathetic companionship, the pandemic may have gone very differently for me.

BODY COUNT: 2

LEAST CONVINCING CONSPIRACY THEORY: Nazis in Antarctica!

Q ANON ASSES



CONSPIRACY THEORY

MVD Visual

Have you ever had a friend return from holiday and force you to sit through hours of their unedited, boring-as-shit home movies that they shot while half in the bag? That's basically what this movie is, without the benefit of being buds with the filmmaker. Set up to look like the lost footage from a cancelled TV show about alien encounters, *Conspiracy*

Theory follows a spray-tanned buffoon and his crew of giggling asshats as they investigate alien sightings near Las Vegas, the Hoover Dam, and Lake Mead. What they discover (as will you) is that amateurish camera work, inept sound editing, and laughable special effects inevitably lead to a piss-poor finale. Might I be so bold as to suggest the premise for a sequel: cast and crew return only to be abducted by almond-eyed aliens and subjected to a 90-minute atomic anal probe.

BODY COUNT: 1 goat

LEAST CONVINCING CONSPIRACY THEORY: Las Vegas is built on alien gold.

CONSPIRACY FAIL



AUTEUR

MVD Visual

When the world's most famous horror director disappears with all the footage to what's rumoured to be the best horror film ever made, a young filmmaker decides to track him down and get a look at the opus no one's ever seen. Though this faux-documentary begins promisingly enough with interviews with the lost film's cast and crew, it

haphazardly shifts gears between doc and drama in a mishmash of forgettable scenes with forgettable actors spewing even more forgettable dialogue. What's unforgettable, however, is that *Auteur* manages to drag actor Tom (*Saving Private Ryan*, *The Relic*) Sizemore down to size for a cameo. Note to wannabe filmmakers: watch this movie before production starts on your debut. You can thank me at your Oscar acceptance speech.

BODY COUNT: 2

LEAST CONVINCING CONSPIRACY THEORY: The CIA wants this film.

LAST CHANCE LANCE

There's one nicely unexpected turn midway through the movie, along with a couple of beasts lifted directly from *The Shining* that detract from the otherwise stark sense of reality the filmmakers maintain.

There are a few hints and references to just what the kidnappers plan to do with the boys, which are uncomfortable yet unforced; their bravery and devotion to protecting each other is always at the forefront, and both young actors deliver mature and sympathetic performances. They're forced to grow up quickly as they struggle to survive, but there are also moments of dark humour playing off the fact that they're still just kids (as when they struggle to figure out how to use a discarded rotary phone to call for help). And since they're too young to have seen a lot of films like this themselves, you can forgive them for a couple of dubious decisions they make as the going gets increasingly dangerous.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

TAMER THINGS

LET US IN

Starring Makenzie Moss, O'Neill Monahan and Tobin Bell

Directed by Craig Moss

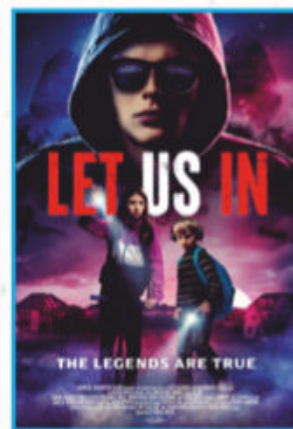
Written by Joe Callero and Craig Moss

Samuel Goldwyn Films

Let Us In's core story is this: when fellow students start going missing, good-natured tween Emily (Makenzie Moss) investigates, aided by her wisecracking pal Christopher (O'Neill Monahan). The villains are fairly vivid: they're a pack of ominous teens in black hoodies, their eyes black orbs, stalking middle school students and cryptically asking, "Will you let us in?" Their victims, beaten until they answer "Yes," meet an undefined fate. But though its villains are lively enough (and based on a real-world urban legend), this sci-fi thriller is a snooze overall – a poor YA cousin to *Stranger Things*, minus the '80s nostalgia and masterful balance of warmth and menace.

Side stories about a science project and middle school cliques only serve as narrative clutter, and even though the various strands eventually cohere, sort of, that doesn't mean they pay off. Craig Moss' direction, though moderately intense when the dark-eyed villains are onscreen, is generally flat. Attempts at humour are Disney Channel corny. Many scenes are predictable, implausible, or both. If there's any subtext intended – about overcoming trauma or the power of friendship, perhaps – the script and the direction fail to highlight it.

There are a few saving graces, though. Makenzie Moss, the director's daughter, is likable in the lead role of Emily, and the flashback to her friend's accidental death is effectively staged. Playing a cranky neighbour, Tobin Bell (*Saw*) has only a single showcase scene, but he aces it, investing a wacko exposition dump about a portal to another world with convincing gravitas.



Unfortunately, the existence of a portal aligns *Let Us In* even more closely with *Stranger Things*, a vastly superior production that likewise features missing kids, science experiments, and, yep, dangerous portals. Bottom line: the young adult crowd might find it good for slumber parties but for seasoned horror fans, it's a pass.

MARK BENEDICT

OCCULT OF PERSONALITY

DACHRA

Starring Yasmine Dimassi, Aziz Jebali and Bilel Slatnia
Written and directed by Abdelhamid Bouchnak
Dekalog

Tunisia makes a bold but uneven jump into the international horror scene with *Dachra*, which claims at the outset to be inspired by true events and proves to be equally informed by previous movies about rural occultism.

Journalism students Yasmine (Yasmine Dimassi), Walid (Aziz Jebali) and Bilel (Bilel Slatnia) are assigned by their professor to create an "extremely exclusive" investigative film project. They come up with a doozy. They use their connections to get into a mental institution and shoot a madwoman rumoured to be a witch on camera. The encounter goes about as well as you'd expect, though it does leave them with a clue that sends them driving into the land that cell service forgot. At the edge of a deep forest, they witness a little girl drinking blood from a dead bird, and naturally follow her deeper into the woods, emerging in a small village that initially seems welcoming. Too bad they didn't see *Dachra's* opening scene, depicting an unnerving ritual that foreshadows an awful fate for our trio.

The first half of *Dachra* is tense and absorbing, as writer/director Abdelhamid Bouchnak evinces a knack for odd, striking imagery (like a classroom in which stacks of books tower over the professor and students) and camera set-ups. Often isolating the characters in the distance or in corners of the widescreen frame, he builds an apprehension for more concrete terrors to come, which pays off in one of the creepier asylum visits since *The Silence of*



the Lambs. Once we arrive at that little community, however, Bouchnak's own script trips him up. The friends' constant bickering becomes tiresome after a while, and the pace goes slack as the movie keeps contriving reasons for them to stay in a place that's obviously unsafe. As skin-crawling as the grotesque details can be, they're also familiar from past films of this ilk, and a late-coming story turn raises more questions than it answers.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

DEMENTED ARE NO

THE DEMENTED

Starring Felissa Rose, Bret Hart and Ari Lehman
Written and directed by Nigel Hartwell
New Blood Entertainment

The Demented is a low-budget exploitation film that desperately wants to be important: a text introduction proclaims the intention to raise awareness of sex trafficking, but what follows is a schlocky rape-revenge film that barely makes sense. Clunky acting, sterile direction, and a laughable script combine for an offensive parody of the horrific subject it's aiming to shine a light upon.

The film opens with a sex crime, where a young woman is strapped to a bed and menaced by a masked man who films himself torturing and assaulting her. Thus begins a seem-

ingly endless series of crimes in which the killer, known as Chainsaw, brutalizes woman after woman before killing them and selling the snuff films on the black market. These torture scenes are strung together with the barely coherent story of Amanda (Cheyenne Ennis), a young woman kidnapped during a romantic weekend with her boyfriend. She eventually uncovers Chainsaw's extensive sex trafficking and exploitation ring before joining the ghosts of previous victims haunting the grounds and waiting for their chance at revenge.

The Demented does contain a few bright spots, namely appearances by beloved genre stars Felissa Rose and Ari Lehman in supporting roles as well as Bret Hart and Angel Williams lending star power from the wrestling world. However, their characters exist on the film's periphery and could be lifted out entirely with little effect to the main plot — which goes completely off the rails in its final moments, as former victims develop superhuman powers to defeat Chainsaw. Unfortunately, racist language destroys any goodwill the movie may have gained by its noble intentions and low-budget charm.

The horror genre has long been a vessel for social commentary, but effective messaging re-



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SHORT CUTS



BITE-SIZED FRIGHTS
FOR SMALL APPETITES

ON THE SLAB: SCI FI FEAR

GOODBYE

8:06 mins/Alter on YouTube

The fear of death is a pretty reliable well to pull from when it comes to horror, but what's truly terrifying about Tyler Russo's short film is that it posits a universe where our anxieties are only amplified when we reach the other side. When a man dies in a car crash, he moves on to something of an antechamber for the next life, where his essence is imbued in a monitor (voiced by Kevan Brighting) so that he can be questioned by a series of rotating mechanical faces (voiced by Brighting and Wendy White). The interview becomes relentless interrogation as he's forced to confront the darkest moments in his life so his inquisitors can determine his next plane of existence. Russo blends sci-fi and the supernatural into something very dark, both aesthetically and narratively, through the idea that the afterlife can be just as gruelling and oppressive as this one.



BLACK PILL

10:42 mins/Open Television

Science fiction is usually synonymous with spaceships, aliens, and sleek technology, but Jessi Gaston's short proves that technology, like our lives and our psyches, can be a dark, messy place. The film follows Ven (Avery Graham-Howard), a trans-masc who receives a box of pills that promise to bring their fantasies to life. As we get a better sense of what these fantasies entail (and what the black-market company behind it gets out of the exchange), we're reminded to think carefully about how we approach our judgement of these situations. Do we show compassion for those whose indulgences may cause harm to themselves, or try to better understand how we define harm? And do we consider the culpability of those who exploit these indulgences? These are questions asked with heavy doses of grime, viscera, and the grey areas that remind us that the future isn't always squeaky clean.

DETAILS TO FOLLOW

5:09 mins/Dust on YouTube

Michael P. Spencer's film skews more sci-fi than horror, but it does invoke a sense of melancholy and existential dread in a way that proves some stories are better told as a short. We meet Nathan (Osy Ikhile) and Gaia (Laura Rollins) only briefly as they're watching television before a broadcast warns that they are in the blast zone of an incoming nuclear missile. What unfolds in mere minutes is unexpected, disorienting, and heartbreaking as Nathan learns things about Gaia (as well as our place in the universe) that he was never meant to know. Spencer uses only the sparsest bit of story and visual effects to let our imaginations and emotions run wild in a way that puts us in the moment with Nathan – which is possibly the last place you want to be.

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

quires a firm directorial hand and clear artistic vision. *The Demented* has neither of these things, making it a cringey mockery of serious subject matter.

JENN ADAMS

RO-SHAM-BRO

ROCK, PAPER AND SCISSORS

Starring Valeria Giorcelli, Agustina Cerviño and Pablo Sigal

Directed by Martín Blousson and Macarena García Lenzi

Written by Macarena García Lenzi, Martín Blousson,

Julieta García Lenzi and Valentín Javier Diment

Uncork'd Entertainment

After the death of their infirm father, siblings Maria José (Valeria Giorcelli) and Jesús (Pablo Sigal) are content to live as shut-ins within their rundown, mildewing family home. They ignore phone calls and knocks at the door, rejecting the outside world in favour of watching *The Wizard of Oz* repeatedly. Their idyllic isolated existence is threatened when their actress half-sister Magdalena (Agustina Cerviño) arrives to settle the family estate, but one tumble down the stairs later – or was it a shove? – Magdalena is confined to a bed and at the mercy of her siblings.

Rock, Paper and Scissors (known as *Piedra, papel y tijera* in its native Argentina) began as a play written by co-director/co-writer Macarena García Lenzi, and while its theatrical roots are evident in its staging, the singular setting only serves to make the viewer feel as trapped as Magdalena. Despite the depressing palette of browns and beiges, there's a playful quality to it all, a sense that Maria and José have truly created their own reality... but what happens when the house you're warned about, the one where the monsters live, is your childhood home?

As the family's twisted history is revealed, Magdalena isn't sure which sibling she can trust, if any, and her only hope for survival may be to play them against each other. There are plenty of familiar beats throughout that will bring to mind other "torment the invalid" films, such as *Misery* and *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, but with its *Grey Gardens*-meets-Grande Dame Guignol fairy tale leanings and soupçon of black humour, *Rock, Paper and Scissors* is a terrific addition to the canon. As Dorothy says, there's no place like home...but as this film reminds us, that's not always a bad thing.

STACIE PONDER



A PATCHY TALE

SKINWALKER

Starring Eva Hamilton, Cameron Kotecki and Amelia Haberman

Written and directed by Robert Conway

Uncork'd Entertainment

Considering the strides made in terms of representation both in front of and behind the camera lately, it's astonishing that *Skinwalker* would trot out the "Indian burial ground" trope yet again. Even more astonishing, perhaps, is that the trope and legends of Navajo culture

HORROR-COMEDY WHODUNIT WEREWOLVES WITHIN TAKES A BITE OUT OF THE TENSIONS DIVIDING MODERN-DAY AMERICA

DOG EAT DOG

BY SEAN PLUMMER

SCREENWRITER MISHNA WOLFF HESITATES WHEN IT'S SUGGESTED THAT HER FILM *WEREWOLVES WITHIN* IS THE FIRST POST-TRUMP HORROR COMEDY. Director Josh Ruben, however, accepts this dubious accolade with a laugh.

"I suppose it is, even though he is *who we do not speak of*," he jokes. "I'm happy to be a part of what I imagine will be more of a wave of fun horror. I think we're ready to laugh a bit while being scared on occasion."

Out July 2 on VOD from IFC Films, *Werewolves Within* sees forest ranger Finn (Sam Richardson) dispatched to Beaverfield, whose population is divided between those who support a gas pipeline being built through the small mountain town (and being paid handsomely for it) and those who don't. These seething resentments only worsen when the community starts getting picked off by a werewolf.

The Trump angle comes in because the tensions between the townsfolk mirror those that split Americans during The Donald's term quite clearly, particularly the idea of individualism vs. community. Beaverfield's very own Karen, the nosy Trish, blames Antifa for defacing her pro-pipeline sign and names her dog Chachi (after Trump supporter Scott Baio's *Happy Days* character), which drives this idea home.

"The film is so thematically relevant now, even more so than when we shot it," Ruben says. "We are constantly pointing fingers. Resentments are boiling over. Everyone is hot under the collar. People are angry. It can also feel futile to be good. The theme of the film, without giving anything away, has to do with being a good neighbour. Cooling folks down with reason instead of shouting is crucial, and I think goodness ultimately is the best weapon against evil."

The idea for the film sprang from a meeting that Wolff, who rose to prominence with her bestselling 2009 memoir *I'm Down*, took with video game developer Ubisoft. The company behind the *Assassin's Creed* franchise was looking to have women writers tackle their titles, she says, "through a female gaze and see if new ideas or new thinking originated from it."

Wolff took a shine to the virtual reality whodunit *Werewolves Within*, where players sit around a campfire and try to figure out which of them is a lycanthrope.

"The first thing they told me was be creative," she says about Ubisoft's limited editorial direction. "'Think outside the box. Be totally irreverent with our titles.' Well, not totally irreverent."

CollegeHumor Originals alumna Ruben became involved after his no-budget horror-comedy *Scare Me* debuted at Sundance last year. It was there that the company producing *Werewolves Within* saw his film and subsequently offered him the directing gig. Ruben jokes that he only got hired because *Scare Me* "not only has references to werewolves but also features characters who are snowed-in at a cabin. So they thought, 'You're on brand!'"

Ruben loved Wolff's script and was happy to keep the screenwriter on board throughout the creative process, even incorporating her suggestions into his final edit.

"It felt like *Arachnophobia*," he says of her script. "It felt like whimsical early Spielberg; it felt like *Fargo*. And that's when I knew I had to get in here and build out this world and play in this sandbox."

The resulting film pits Finn's unflagging neighbourliness against, for lack of a more subtle analogy, the brutal werewolf within us all. In fact, the werewolf justifies its cruelty towards its prey as no worse than the "fear, greed, and petty nature" it sees in humanity every day. Ruben takes

a brighter view.

"I understand that when things get too dark, we give up on humanity," he says. "I mean, look at these poor kids getting killed by cops every day in marginalized communities. It's hard not to think 'oh, I'm just going to give up.' And if I were a werewolf, maybe I could go all-out vigilante on those who you believe might deserve vengeance. But obviously, antithetical to that, our heroes realize that is not how you solve problems. And it's a really interesting argument because goodness can feel futile. But, ultimately, good does prevail and is the best weapon, even against claws." 🐾





Great White

would be used in service of such an overused “rage virus” storyline.

In late 19th-century Arizona, a ne’er-do-well by the name of Benny (Nathaniel Burns) swipes an amulet off a desiccated corpse atop a table in the middle of a clearing – but this is no ordinary table! It’s an *Apache* table. Or maybe Navajo? Benny certainly doesn’t care, and neither does the filmmaker, who makes it an “Indian” burial site by placing several skulls on sticks around it. At any rate, stealing this “elder death token” is bad news, for shortly after the swiping, Benny’s pal Hugo is bitten by a rattlesnake – but this is no ordinary rattlesnake! Its bite not only induces bleeding from all manner of face holes, it also causes the victim to get all angry and bitey, which passes the plague onto the next person, and so on and so on. But this is no ordinary zombie thing we’ve seen a hundred times before! This time, it’s the spirit of a skin-walker, an angry shapeshifter and dead owner of the amulet.

We’re told about the legend of the skin-walker from one of the countless white characters in the story, for *Skinwalker* is, in fact, their story. The film isn’t even a proper “revenge from beyond the grave” tale, for the Native characters are little more than “ooga booga” set dressing afforded maybe five minutes of a 95-minute runtime. Writer/director/cinematog-

rapher/actor Robert Conway tries to make the most of a micro budget, but decidedly 21st-century actor inflections render it all little more than cosplay. These limitations are forgivable, but the tired trope abuse isn’t.

STACIE PONDER

JUMPED THE SHARK

GREAT WHITE

Starring Katrina Bowden, Aaron Jakubenko and Kimie Tsukakoshi
Directed by Martin Wilson
Written by Michael Boughen
RLJE Films/Shudder

No, Universal hasn’t relented and allowed the notoriously derivative Enzo G. Castellari film to

see official North American release, though this *Great White* also borrows a few cues directly from *Jaws*. There’s an opening-scene victim later discovered washed up on shore, and another corpse that makes a sudden appearance in a submerged, wrecked boat. This Aussie production more closely resembles *The Reef*, which also hailed from Down Under

and, frankly, did it better.

Kaz (Katrina Bowden) and Charlie (Aaron Jakubenko) run a small charter-flight business

that’s financially ailing, and Kaz acts distracted around Charlie in a way that can only mean she’s got a particular bit of news for him. Things seem to be looking up when they’re hired by Joji (Tim Kano) and Michelle (Kimie Tsukakoshi) to fly them to a picturesque cove ominously named Hell’s Reef. It’s only after they depart that things really get bad, and the two couples, along with cook Benny (Te Kohe Tuhaka), become stranded on the open ocean in a small raft with a great white shark circling them.

The set-up is decent, with director Martin Wilson building modest suspense via a combination of overhead and surface-level shots, before the film becomes waterlogged. The characterizations in *Great White* remain strictly functional – Joji is a hothead for no other reason than to

create tension later – and the shark action is both negligible and predictable, presented in a thoroughly pedestrian manner with the characters getting devoured in exactly the order you expect them to. Another problem with *Great White* is that the shark itself (largely CGI) never becomes a character, the way it does in *Jaws* – or *The Shallows*, to cite another superior

modern killer-fish film. Even the phony-looking mockup in the Castellari flick has *presence*.

KEN MICHAELS



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BY MICHAEL GINGOLD



BRINGING *THE KINDRED* BACK INTO THE WORLD

"If you're in the cult/indie-film disc distribution business, when you get the rights to a movie, it's like, 'Okay, who's going to come out of the woodwork and tell us that they actually own it?'" says Synapse Films president Don May Jr., who's been in that field as long as anyone. "You can do a lot of work and amass quite a few thousand dollars in expenses, only to find, whoops, there's a legal problem and you have to stop until it's taken care of. It happens quite a bit, especially with the older, classic films from the '60s, '70s, '80s – not so much the newer stuff, obviously. I'm kind of used to it, and I've had a lot of practice, and you just have to have the stomach to handle it. We deal with it as best we can, and put the movies out when we can, once we're able to prove our ownership."

Untangling those kinds of issues can lead to long delays for a genre disc, even after it has been announced. Sometimes, it's that announcement that attracts the attention of those rights holders in the first place, which is what happened with Synapse's long-in-coming Blu-ray release of *The Kindred*. The distributor first acquired the 1987 creature feature, in which a group of students and scientists confront a slime monster born of genetic experimentation, way back in 2006, and broke the news that November.

"For whatever reason, *The Kindred* was up for auction, and we put in a bid for it and won," May

recalls. "They told us, 'The materials are over at Paramount, so next time you're in LA, you can grab them and take them out.' So that's what we did. A few short weeks later, we announced the title, and a day or so after that, we got a phone call from Charlie Meeker, who was a producer on the film, saying, 'Where did you get my movie?' [Laughs] 'I just want to know, because I own that film, and you didn't buy it from me!' We told him the story, and he said, 'Well, that's not right.'"

The Kindred was a production of Meeker and Edward S. Feldman's F/M Entertainment, which had also been behind *The Hitcher* and *Near Dark*. May is quick to note that the situation between Synapse and Meeker was amicable from the start.

"We became very fast friends," he recalls. "Charlie was the nicest, coolest guy in the world, and up until the day he passed away this past February, we were in constant contact. We got *Hot Dog... The Movie* through him, and he was awesome. He fought tooth and nail to get *The Kindred* back; he said, 'This is mine, I can prove it, and while you don't have a legal license

with this other company, if you help me, I will give you guys the movie.' It was admirable that someone like Charlie would fight that hard for a film like *The Kindred*, and say, 'I made this with Ed Feldman, and nobody owns it but me.'"

The only downside was the long wait for Meeker to reclaim *The Kindred* so Synapse could start work on it.

"I don't really know the details of what happened," May says, "but a few years ago, he called us up and said, 'Okay guys, we can do this now.' It was like, 'Oh my God – I've aged a decade,' you know? And when we started again on the movie, I realized that the masters we had for *The Kindred* from back then were just not as good as what we could do today. Scanners have changed, technology has changed, storage is all digital now instead of tape, and I said, 'You know what? All this time has passed, we can do better.' So I talked to

Jerry Chandler, my business partner, and we decided to go back to the actual 35mm materials we pulled from Paramount and do a new scan. And I'm glad we did, because the movie looks 1000 times better than the version that was done fifteen or so years ago. So all the fans of *The*



Kindred who have been patient – and those who haven't! – can be assured that it's a much, much better-looking film now."

In addition, this edition of *The Kindred* gives those devotees a little something extra.

"The nice thing is that the 35mm interpositive we got had extra footage in it that was not in the R-rated version released in the U.S.," May notes. "I think at one point on the Blu-ray commentary, the two directors, Jeffrey Obrow and Stephen Carpenter, mention something about having no problems with the MPAA. But there are maybe 30 or 40 seconds of gore that are not in the theatrical cut, and our version has that back in. It's very slight, just a few snippets here and there, but it's nice to have it in there."

That commentary is part of an extensive extras package on the *Kindred* Blu-ray, which also includes the 51-minute making-of documentary *Inhuman Experiments* by Michael Felsher's Red Shirt Pictures, behind-the-scenes special effects footage, storyboard and still galleries, assorted promotional material, a CD soundtrack, and (full disclosure) liner notes by this writer. May reveals that the disc's long road to fruition proved advantageous to pulling together talent for *Inhuman Experiments*.

"Amanda Pays is in it, which was a coup for Mike Felsher to pull off. That was another happy accident, because we had to wait until the whole legal issue was resolved, and while that was happening, he was able to get Amanda. She wasn't available at first because of her schedule, and then all of a sudden, because we had the delays, she said, 'Hey, I've got some time, I'd love to talk about it.'"

Obrow and Carpenter, who had previously collaborated with Synapse on a Blu-ray of their debut feature *The Dorm That Dripped Blood*, were equally enthusiastic.

"They were happy, because for them, *The Kindred* was a huge jump. *The Dorm That Dripped Blood* was a \$90,000 movie that they shot over Christmas break at their college, and they weren't even supposed to be doing that, and they got a theatrical deal. They jumped from that little school project to *The Power*, and from that to *The Kindred*, a \$3-million movie shot on the same soundstages as *Citizen Kane*! So they had a great time doing the commentary and watch-



ing the movie again. I think Steve, on the commentary, admits that he hadn't seen *The Kindred* since it was first released. And at the end, he was like, 'Holy shit, that's a lot of fun! I forgot how fun this movie is!'"

May agrees: "It's a blast, it really is. And the reason is because it's one of those movies where the effects are all practical. There's no CGI, there's no computer bullshit, the creatures are animatronic, there's blood and gore, there are people turning into fish – it's crazy! That's what I love; it's just so much fun to watch films from the era of *Re-Animator* and things like that, where you've got a lot of in-camera gore and prosthetics. Those are my favourite kinds of movies."

For fans of another Feldman-Meeker fright

film, the inevitable question follows: did Synapse have any discussions with the producers (Feldman died last October) about *The Hitcher*, which has long been on many a Blu-ray wish list?

"Oh yeah," May says. "I talked to Charlie about it, but I think it's stuck at Warner Bros. HBO Video had it, and that's part of Warners now, and it seems like the regime there is changing all the time. So who knows where *The Hitcher* is? It's never come out on Blu-ray in the U.S.; I don't even know if it's ever had an anamorphic DVD here, though there are overseas editions. It's probably just sitting at Warner Bros., waiting for them to put it out. Maybe somebody there will read this and say, 'Hey, I forgot we owned that movie! Let's do it!'"

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Auntie Dearest

by John W. Bowen

"Did I miss something?" It's a phrase we've all muttered from time to time. It's one you'll find yourself muttering again – or perhaps shouting hysterically – during the whiplash-inducing WTF-fest that is *Butcher, Baker, Nightmare Maker* (1981). Well, at least during the first half-hour; after that, I slipped into some kind of numbly-mad, logic-boycotting Stockholm Syndrome. A little bit slasher and a little bit more *giallo* (albeit thoroughly American), *BBNM* has also drawn comparisons (from the few who've seen it) to everything from *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* to *Oedipus Rex*.

Issued at various times in various territories as *Night Warning*, *Evil Protégé*, and *Thrilled to Death* (none of which have any more connection to the content than the title in question here), our story kicks off with a flashback. After toddler Billy Lynch's parents are killed in a delightfully over-the-top car "accident," he's adopted by his obsessive, possessive, bugfuck-crazy Aunt Cheryl (bugfuck-crazy Susan Tyrrell), who goes even more bugfuck-crazy fourteen years later when now-high school basketball star Billy (Jimmy McNichol) gets a scholarship and begins talking about (gasp!) going away to college. After all, Cheryl's already having a hard enough time accepting Billy's first girlfriend (pre-*Newhart* nubile newbie Julia Duffy) and various other symptoms of encroaching manhood that threaten to pry him from her icky grasp. How icky? Incest icky. And none of that subtly implied cinematic incest, mind you; this shit's straight outta the Proud Boys manual, but I'll leave the particulars for you to witness for yourself.

Aunt Cheryl's tactics initially range from confrontational ("College is for rich kids and people with brains," she hisses at Billy, "you wouldn't fit in there") to devious (drugging him before the big game so he plays like a drunken spaz), but before long, corpses start piling up too – all the better to frame Billy for murder. From this point forward, writers Stephen Breimer and Alan Jay Glueckman force-feed plot points to us like the gluttony-guy in *Se7en*. Witness Cheryl suddenly throwing herself –



tits out and everything – at the TV repairman. He initially rebuffs her, then tells her he'll settle for a blow job, which somehow enrages her sufficiently to start wailin' on him with a kitchen knife. Makes zero sense, but ultimately, we get a dead body and blood-drenched crime scene for the police to find.

Enter inept, power-mad, comically homophobic homicide cop Joe Carlson (hulking action flick regular Bo Svenson and his chin), who's anxious to hang a murder rap on our boy Billy while spouting gems like, "The victim was a fag, the coach is a fag, the kid is a fag. He grew up without a father, with only women around. It's a classic case." Anyone wanna bet Joe's favourite movie is *Gladiator*?

Gory murders, closet-case cops, and hot wet aunt-on-nephew action notwithstanding, the single most noteworthy (read: inexplicable) aspect of *BBNM* is probably that it was directed by William Asher, who has no other horror films on his resume. Between the 1950s and the '80s, he shot countless episodes of classic TV shows from *I Love Lucy* to *The Twilight Zone* to *Bewitched* to *The Dukes of Hazzard*. His shorter list of theatrical features includes the entire Frankie Avalon/Annette

Funicello beach blanket canon (*Beach Party*, *Muscle Beach Party*, *Bikini Beach*, *Beach Blanket Bingo*, *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini*), and the second of his four wives was *Bewitched* star Elizabeth Montgomery. Somehow, toward the end of all this, he wound up directing *BBNM*.

Then again, one could easily spill even more ink on Aunt Cheryl herself. After making her Broadway debut as a teenager, Susan Tyrrell spent decades working with directors as diverse as John Huston, Andy Warhol, Paul Verhoeven, John Waters, Rocky Schenck, and – yikes – Victor Salva. She also received a Best Supporting Actress Oscar nomination for one of her earliest roles (Huston's *Fat City*) and got tonsil-tongued by Iggy Pop in John Waters' *Cry-baby*, in between guest turns on *Starsky and Hutch*, *Kojak*, *Tales From the Crypt*, and more before her death in 2012 at 67. She was also a quotable curmudgeon of

the first order, who summed up her career thusly: "I'm disillusioned with the whole fuckin' world. I'm having my tubes tied next week. I just want to ensure that no actors come out of me."

Now get the hell out of my basement while I have that tattooed on my neck. 🖤





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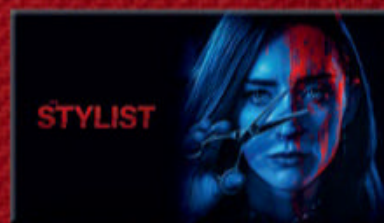
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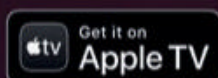
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UNOBSTRUCTED
VIEW



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DIABOLIK

FILES FROM THE BLACK MUSEUM

THE LONG SHADOWS OF CLASSIC HORROR'S PAST

BY PAUL CORUPE

Spin Doctors

"RELEASED JUST A YEAR AFTER UNIVERSAL'S *FRANKENSTEIN* (1931), *DOCTOR X* FURTHER EXPLORES THE UNSETTLING IDEA OF DOCTORS VIOLATING THEIR OATHS AND USING THEIR PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE FOR DUBIOUS ENDS."

"Do no harm or injustice" states one of main tenets of the Hippocratic Oath, the foundational ethical standard that many doctors and medical professionals aim to uphold to this day. But as many top health officials stepped out of the shadows over the past year to address the pandemic, there has been a heightened suspicion in some circles about these mysterious figures – what, really, are their true motives? That's not too surprising, since even before COVID-19, our anxieties about problematic physicians have been reflected in horror films, including the early chiller *Doctor X* (1932), recently released in a restored Blu-ray version by Warner Archive. The first colour horror feature ever made, *Doctor X* stars Lionel Atwill as a mad surgeon trying to decide which of his eccentric medical colleagues may be a clandestine serial killer, in a story that seems to touch on our own modern struggle to separate medical fact from conspiratorial fiction.

In the film, New York City is struck by a series of grisly, cannibalistic murders that appear to correspond to the lunar cycles. A practical-joking reporter (Lee Tracy) reluctantly follows the trail of the so-called Full Moon Killer to a local Academy of Surgical Research run by Dr. Xavier (Atwill). Xavier is convinced that the culprit is one of his fellow scientists, but is it cannibalism expert Dr. Wells (Preston Foster), brain surgeon Dr. Haines (John Wray), or possibly one of the lunar researchers, Dr. Rowitz (Arthur Edmund Carewe) or Dr. Duke (Harry Beresford)? The sleuthing surgeon is even aware that Haines and Rowitz, once shipwrecked together, are suspected of eating a third companion to stay alive. Believing that the sight of the full moon triggers a memory of cannibalism that the killer is compelled to repeat, Xavier invites these unusual guests to his gloomy mansion where he and his daughter Joanne (Fay Wray) have set up an experiment to expose the true identity of the depraved doctor.

Notable for its elaborate and expressionistic sets jammed full of experimental equipment, *Doctor X* squeezes a whole squad of mad scientists into



the well-worn whodunnit template. Released just a year after Universal's *Frankenstein* (1931), this film further explores the unsettling idea of doctors violating their oaths and using their professional knowledge for dubious ends. When Dr. Rowitz is asked whether he approves of Xavier's experiment (a kind of lie-detector test that measures the scientists' involuntary reactions to scenes of recreated murders), he claims that "necessity has no ethics." Later, Dr. Haines is accused by a colleague of harbouring "sadistic tendencies" and the Full Moon Killer himself – once fully revealed – admits that he's been stealing samples of human flesh from cannibalistic tribes to develop a synthetic flesh substitute. "What difference did it make if a few people had to die?" he sneers at Xavier.

Of course, real health officials would never act so brazenly evil. Still, we all know of a few individuals who have become unshakably convinced that most doctors across the world have been purposely misrepresenting the dangers of the pandemic in recent months. At a time where clear public health guidance is more important than ever, a never-ending stream of social media posts continue to sow doubt about the efficacy of facemasks, pandemic lockdowns, and vaccines – even all three at once. Although the "proof" for these claims usually comes down to the work of a small cabal of dissenting doctors, their research is often wielded as a trump card over more generally accepted findings.

When it comes to the global pandemic response, there have of course been many official missteps, including confusing guidelines, contradictory advice, and botched government rollouts. But even well-meaning doctors can make mistakes – although he's the most ethical character in *Doctor X*, Dr. Xavier's well-meaning experiment goes awry when it fingers the wrong suspect, and almost causes Joanne's death when the real killer appears. Still, even though medical professionals may not always be deserving of your complete and heartfelt trust, they are still less worrisome than the armchair researchers who seek to further exploit our natural anxieties about doctors for their own unhealthy ends. 🧟

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Demented is an 80's style horror film that combines horror icons from the past and famous wrestlers in a very twisted tale. This is Writer/Director Nigel Hartwell's (Insight of Evil series, The Expedition) most recent film.



One morning Senica (Dakota House - North of 60) awakes to his girlfriend Amanda (Cheyenne Ennis - Insight of Evil) missing. Without a thought he involves the authorities. Detective (Felissa Rose - Sleep Away Camp) interviews a lead suspect in the case Brad (Bret "Hitman" Hart - WWE Hall of Famer). Brad is an underground snuff film producer and runs an illegal website on the Dark Web. After the Detective reviewed some of his films, she realizes that several missing women (Angelina Love, Anesha Gopaul, & Hanna Hudson) star in Brad's disturbing films. The Detective follows a dark path leading the investigation to a local strip club owner (Ari Lehman - Friday the 13th). Now close to solving the case Brad agrees to help authorities find the filmmaker/actor Chainsaw Chuck.

This story attempts to raise awareness as it runs the full spectrum of the human condition and exposes the sometimes dark pathology of today's Social Media. Although fictitious, this movie depicts the cruel reality of the number of women who go missing every year out of the sexual trade practice.



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IN THIS
ISSUE

**DID YOU HEAR WHAT EDDIE
GEIN DONE?**

Harold Schechter and Eric Powell
Albatross Funnybooks

HAILSTONE #1

Rafael Scavone and
Rafael de Latorre
Stout Club/
Comixology Originals

**LONDON HORROR
COMIC #9**

John-Paul Kamath and
Julius Ohta
LHC

RED ROOM #1

Ed Piskor
Fantagraphics

DEVIL'S KITCHEN #1

Moaner T. Lawrence and
Corvin Lüders
creaturi.de

**THE CONJURING:
THE LOVER #1**

Various
DC Horror

BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS

BY PEDRO CABEZUELO

Even if you've never heard of Ed Gein, you're definitely aware of his notorious influence on pop culture thanks to iconic films such as *Psycho*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Silence of the Lambs*. Born and raised in rural Wisconsin, Gein spent part of his adult life exhuming corpses from local graveyards, and harvesting their bones, organs, and skin for furniture and assorted trophies. Infamously, Gein attempted to create a "woman suit" out of flayed human flesh, in the hopes of wearing it to better impersonate his dead mother. By the time he was arrested in 1957, he was also charged with the grisly murders of two local women.

Despite the many examinations of Gein's atrocities, both fictional and biographical, legendary comic book creator Eric Powell (*The Goon*) felt there was an aspect of Gein's life that had yet to be truly explored – something that could only be done justice through the comic medium. With many an idea floating around in his head, Powell approached true crime writer Harold Schechter (*The Serial Killer Files*) with an offer too good to pass up.

"I've wanted to turn one of my books into a

graphic novel for a long time," says Schechter. "I'm a lifelong comics fan, have written about them, and even corresponded with some of the greats (like Will Eisner). So when Eric – whose work I've admired for a long time – contacted me through my agent and proposed a collaboration, I leapt at the chance."

The result, titled *Did You Hear What Eddie Gein Done?*, is a 200-page visual treatise on the inner workings of Gein's mind. From the outset, Powell and Schechter wanted to use the graphic novel format to probe into Gein's thoughts to deliver a powerful, fact-based dramatization of the tragic, psychotic, and sometimes heartbreaking events.

Tellingly, the book opens with the premiere of *Psycho* and Hitchcock displaying his showmanship, promoting the film's notoriety while reducing its real-life inspiration to a minor sound bite. Powell and Schechter hope to do the opposite: dismiss the Hollywood trappings of the last 60 years and not only shine a spotlight on the factual details of Gein's crimes but also, as Schechter explains, "draw the reader into the phantasmagoric realm of his uniquely deranged psyche."

As a result, a large portion of the graphic novel's success will hinge on the artist's ability to convey Gein's nightmarish mind in a vivid and creative manner. Anyone familiar with Powell's work will know he's more than up to the job.

"Besides his stunning draftsmanship and mastery of the comic book medium, Eric is brilliant at conjuring up dark Gothic worlds that resonate with psychological suggestiveness," says Schechter. "I see him as part of an American tradition that extends back to artists like Poe, whose stories function as powerful projections of nightmarish dreamscapes – in other words, the perfect person to bring Eddie's interior world life."



Did You Hear What Eddie Gein Done?: A fact-based dramatization that probes into the serial killer's "uniquely deranged psyche."

Ultimately, the authors want to remind readers that at the heart of the gruesome events lay very real people whose lives were irrevocably altered.

"I think what makes Gein so endlessly fascinating is that, in the midst of sunny, bland, *Leave-it-to-Beaver*, Eisenhower-era middle America, he was secretly living out something like an ancient pagan religion, involving human sacrifice, the ritual dressing in flayed human skin, the worship of a primitive Great Mother goddess. I'd like readers to come away with a sense that Ed wasn't just a 'psycho' or a serial murderer but a man who had become possessed by something archaic that rose up within him."

FOLLOW PEDRO ON TWITTER @PCABEZUELO



QUICK CUTS

The people of Hailstone, Montana, are having a rough time and it isn't just because they're caught in the middle of the ongoing American Civil War. Cut off from the outside world by never-ending winter storms, the townspeople have to contend with food and supply shortages while the well-stocked Union military factory nearby continues to turn a blind eye to their protests. But when residents start vanishing in the woods and the army still refuses to help, Sheriff Denton Ross and his deputy Tobias are forced to take matters into their own hands, unaware of the new terrors that lurk within the deep forest. The first issue of *Hailstone* proceeds at a leisurely pace, spending most of its time establishing Ross and Tobias, and the conflict between the townspeople and the military. As such, it relies more on mood than incident, something helped immensely by the Civil War setting, which adds an interesting twist to what otherwise appears to be a typical something-lurking-in-the-woods story. The bleak and isolated winter also adds an extra layer of atmosphere to hold the reader's interest until things finally get nasty in the book's last couple of pages. A promising, if not altogether compelling, start.



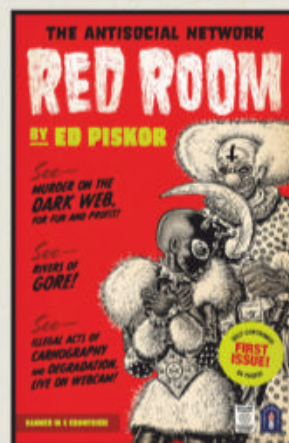
Meet Jane Silver, a British, chain-smoking, trench coat-wearing, supernatural detective with a cynical and world-weary attitude. Jane is the star of both tales in the latest issue of *London Horror Comic*, where she serves a smack-down eviction notice to a den of demon squatters and then has to rescue a female stripper from the joint's (literally) Hellish owners. If Jane sounds like another, slightly more notorious, British, chain-smoking, trench coat-wearing, supernatural detective with a cynical and world-weary attitude, well... the resemblance is purely intentional. What is surprising, however, is that



thanks to John-Paul Kamath's deft writing, Jane comes across as a fully realized character in her own right, complete with quirks and back story, rather than a cutesy, two-dimensional parody. In fact, rather than merely replaying John Constantine's adventures, both stories offer genuinely clever tales of their own, with compelling visuals and a satirical wit that wouldn't have been out of place in early issues of *Hellblazer*.

The horrors of the dark web are revealed in *Red Room*, where one can log on anonymously and view live streams of people being tortured, mutilated, and murdered. Viewers can also pay with crypto currency to request certain acts, making it an even more engrossing and interactive experience. One of the leading red room studios, Pentagonam Pictures

— run by the enigmatic and unidentified "Mistress" — is starting to lose viewership and many of its contracted screen killers are becoming too predictable. Can a recently widowed, overweight court clerk provide the new blood they so desperately need? Often funny but mostly troubling, *Red Room* provides copious amounts of gore to satisfy a ravenous audience, cleverly making the reader as complicit as the fictional streamers. Yet amidst all the eye-gouging, stabbing, tearing, slicing, and mutilating, most disturbing are the comments made by viewers during the sessions themselves. Having spent some time on social media, the cheers, jeers, and eventual nasty arguments all rang true, giving the entire exercise an uncomfortable level of veracity.



Devil's Kitchen (a.k.a. *Teufels Küche*) brings us a duo of Deutsch-flavoured devilments with "Mr. Masurka's Schrebergarten" and "The Clown." The first is a fairly straightforward nasty-person-gets-his-comeuppance yarn, EC Comics style, while the second is a mesmerizing stroll through the streets of Cologne with a police officer on the trail of a bizarre, decomposing clown. Both stories take full advantage of the German setting (helped immensely by some stunning photo-based painted art), incorporating aspects of the local culture and immediately giving the book a very unique flavour. In addition to the first tale's clever use of a *schrebergarten* — a concept that



may be new to non-European readers — Moaner T. Lawrence also works in supernatural elements of the Shuar, a historical Peruvian/Ecuadorian tribe. This, combined with the book's oversized glossy format, will provide even the most jaded horror comic fan with a satisfying, ghoulish getaway.

The Conjuring: The Lover, a new five-issue miniseries, is split up into two tales: the first forming the main, ongoing narrative while the second, "Tales From the Artifact Museum," will presumably spotlight a different item each issue. Despite having a limited number of pages to work with (both narratives total 22 pages), each story provides a satisfying read. In the first, lonely college student Jessica struggles with her grades and social awkwardness while unknowingly being stalked by a demonic presence. The writers make Jessica an appealing character while dropping clues to her background and misfit status — they also throw in a few lurking shadowy figures, *Conjuring* style, but thankfully without the loud musical stings. The back-up tale, "The Ferryman," is equally compact, spinning a yarn of a man who believes Death has been stalking him his entire life in search of a coin he stole from corpse's mouth during a childish prank. Yes Virginia, it is still possible to tell good horror stories in six pages. 🍷



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BLEEDING SKULL!

A 1990s TRASH-HORROR ODYSSEY

Joseph A. Ziemba, Annie Choi, and Zack Carlson
Fantagraphics

By the 1990s, video had almost completely taken over the horror market, with countless movies that might have played theatres in the previous decade going straight to VHS, and an endless string of made-for-tape sequels issuing from the studios and major independents. But beneath that wave, down on the genre's murky seabed, dwelled a species of lower-rent shockers that would never have hit the big screen. Often shot on video, or sometimes 16mm or even Super-8 film, these low-rent, disreputable fright feasts were a subculture unto themselves. The

gang at bleedingskull.com have been extolling their questionable virtues for years, and after covering the '80s in their first tome, they're back with a dissection of the cheapest chills of the 1990s.

If, like this writer, you were around and old enough to appreciate these flicks at the time, *Bleeding Skull!*

A 1990s Trash-Horror Odyssey will catapult you back to the days when you had to search the bottom shelves of your local video store or prowl conventions to uncover these microbudget gems. For those who weren't, it serves nicely as an introduction to a world of bargain-basement slashers, cheaply made-up zombies, naked vampire girls, and some of the most demented imaginations the fear field has ever seen. You'll meet low-budget auteurs such as J.R. Bookwalter, Kevin J. Lindemuth, David "The Rock" Nelson, Todd Cook, Todd Sheets, and many others, and be exposed to truly demented stuff such as *L.A. AIDS Jabber*. Additionally, a multitude of VHS boxes are reproduced here, offering a cavalcade of homemade art and images from the dawn of Photoshop that will truly make your skull bleed.



The 250 reviews contained within these pages are witty, in-depth, and cued to the proper way to approach these flicks; Joseph A. Ziemba, Annie Choi, and Zack Carlson may love this sub-genre in general, but they are discerning about what makes some titles truly fun and others a drag. A remarkable number of the critiques also relate the movies to the authors' life experiences, which lends *Bleeding Skull!* a consistently amusing personal touch.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

WITH TEETH

Brian Keene
Death's Head Press

Brian Keene clearly had a blast writing *With Teeth*. Narrating as though he were there, he gathers us around the table for story time. There's no time wasted for niceties, as our narrator makes it abundantly clear that his vampires "don't fucking sparkle," nor do they resemble the myths Hollywood has entertained us with all our lives. Instead, these vampires come with a fresh coat of terror rarely explored in their monstrous history. Framing his story in the relatively confined space of a novella only adds to the frenetic pace as survival quickly becomes paramount for our desperate characters.

The tale centres around a group of seven men – brothers, cousins, and life-long buds – living in Poor Town America, either too stuck or too loyal to get any further in life than they already are. However, when the spark of an idea ignites a fire among them, the men embark on a meth-making opportunity that's bound to pay off big. They scout out the perfect spot to set up shop down in the hollows of one of their properties: a place they'd been forbidden to venture near as children. A place where darkness comes early and silence is a warning. Turns out, it's not poachers or The Man who could ruin their plans so much as the hungry dead things



waiting to be stumbled upon.

Driven to feed and little else, these cunning creatures of the night lend themselves perfectly to Keene's innate ability to elicit fear, panic, and camaraderie in easily digestible, relentless prose. *With Teeth* doesn't just bite, it devours, with flavours that linger on the palate well beyond its final words.

RICK HIPSON

ASSAULT ON THE SYSTEM:
THE NON-CONFORMIST CINEMA
OF JOHN CARPENTERTroy Howarth
Self-Published

Assault on the System: The Non-Conformist Cinema of John Carpenter presents an intimate look at both the personal and professional life of cinematic maestro John Carpenter. Chock-full of uncommon knowledge, it is an essential read for the filmmaker's devotees.

Author Troy Howarth begins by delving deep into Carpenter's roots; growing up in a small town, he was a cinema-loving social outcast with big dreams. And while we all love a success story, sometimes success doesn't exactly come easily. *Assault on the System* outlines the various trials and tribulations

Carpenter faced in his career as an ever-evolving filmmaker.

Over time, many of his films would gain a massive following, but the book notes that they weren't always received in a positive light upon release. Featuring excerpts of critic reviews, focused analyses on every entry in his filmography, plus a plethora of interviews with Carpenter himself, *Assault on the System* paints a full picture without shying away from the ugly bits. Highlights include an in-depth exploration of his relationship with prolific screenwriter Dan O'Bannon; the creative influence of such directors as Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks; Rob Bottin's role in altering the creative direction of *The Thing* (1982); the thought process behind *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (I know y'all are curious about that one!); his relationships with Adrienne Barbeau, Debra Hill, Kurt Russell, and others.





Assault On The System: Halloween III: Season of the Witch.

An impressively thorough study of the filmmaker and his work, *Assault on the System* is an absolute must for lovers not only of Carpenter's oeuvre, but of genre film as a whole.

BREANNA WHIPPLE

TO DROWN IN DARK WATER

Steve Toase

Undertow Publications

Steve Toase is a name to remember, as this debut collection illustrates. There is style, there is range and, most importantly, there are loads of powerful, unpredictable frights. The stories, averaging at a dozen pages each, contain entire universes.

Some are uniquely weird, such as "Call Out," in which a rural veterinarian encounters something sinister born of a cow, and "The Kromlau Gambit," which depicts the horrible outcome of a Russian space program experiment. Some are apocalyptic: in "The Taste of Rot" a new god of decay emerges through a young woman after devastating floods, while in "The Jaws of Ouroboros" the old megaliths are teeth of underground monsters, digesting people, and turning them into a powerful drug.

Others, such as "Not All the Coal that is Dug Warms the World" are satiric, with its dystopia in which terminally ill patients pay their bills by allowing a valuable substance to be surgically harvested from their bodies.

Occasionally, urban decay reigns, as in "Dirt Upon My Skin" and "No Sun to Guide the Way," while folk horror runs rampant in "Verwelktag," where pagan flower worship turns deadly in the German countryside, *Midsommar*-style, and in "Grenzen," where a man smuggling a parcel into East Germany loses his little girl in the big woods.

The old-school scares are most powerful in "Beneath the Forest's Wilting Leaves," which a present-day Algernon Blackwood could've written, about a father and son who start building a small hut in the lonely woods, but something keeps adding to it; in "Atelier," reminiscent of Sheridan Le Fanu, which deals with a young art student hired to paint a portrait of a mute, mysterious figure in an old house; and finally, "Dancing Sober in the Dust," a tale of a scholar obsessed by a pair of expressionist dancer-performers from 1920s Germany, and their hurtful, blood-soaked costumes.

Read Toase and shudder. Then thank me later.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

MOON CHILD

Gaby Triana

Alienhead Press

Moon Child opens on a startling, seemingly inexplicable tragedy, as witnessed through the eyes of a young boy. It sticks with you, which is good because it takes some time for the connection between this idyllic-turned-terrible sequence and the story of Valentina, which unravels

DANTE'S PICK



THE QUEEN OF THE CICADAS

V. Castro

Flame Tree Press

Mexican-American author Violet Castro delivers a powerhouse horror novel with *The Queen of the Cicadas*, which utilizes Mexican folklore and ancient beliefs to tell an unconventional revenge tale born from the tragic and horrifying plight of undocumented workers in America.

Divorcee Belinda first heard the tale of Milagros – a migrant worker who was tied to a tree, tortured, and killed in the 1950s – when she was a child. It terrified her and stuck with her until adulthood, when her best friend unknowingly books the now-rehabilitated estate where the murder occurred for her wedding. This kickstarts Belinda's obsession with the crime anew, along with a desire to make things right, as much as she can anyway. In conducting her research, Belinda unearths some unfathomable truths that unleash a series of ever wilder supernatural happenings, ultimately helping to facilitate the emergence of a new god – or rather, the re-emergence of a very old one.

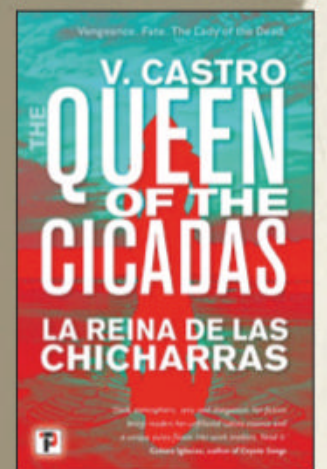
As this suggests, what begins as a story of otherworldly revenge soon veers off in several unexpected directions, with new revelations found in dusty old boxes, and the on-camera murder of a reality TV host by a force from beyond. At one point, mid-book, in a slight narrative departure, *The Queen of the Cicadas* even takes readers deep inside the head and domain of Mictecacihuatl, the Aztec queen of the dead herself. It all works to powerful, dizzying effect.

In Belinda's well-intentioned attempt to expose and make restitution for the past, something powerful and terrifying is awakened in the present that may just have lasting ramifications for the future, and not just the futures of Belinda and her friends.

The expertly crafted *Queen of the Cicadas* reminds us how horrors from the past can creep back to haunt us in the present, often in ways we least expect. That's a lesson best never forgotten.

God, forgive us our trespasses.

MONICA S. KUEBLER



A POSTHUMOUS PUBLICATION BRINGS TO LIGHT AN UNKNOWN
HORROR NOVEL FROM A WELL-KNOWN MASTER OF MULTIPLE GENRES

Back From the Dead

BY DEŽAN OGOSTAHOVIĆ

Michael Shea, who died all-too-prematurely in 2014, was a writer who excelled in every major fantastic genre: a two-time winner of the World Fantasy Award for sword-and-sorcery fantasy and nominated for a Hugo and a Nebula for his chilling sci-fi horror novelette “The Autopsy,” he was also a significant voice in contemporary horror. His literary influences were Fritz Leiber and Jack Vance, but also Clark Ashton Smith – and H.P. Lovecraft. This August, his “novel of Lovecraftian terror,” *Mr. Cannyharme*, written in 1981 but never published, will be released by Hippocampus Press.

Shea was among the authors, including Ramsey Campbell and T.E.D. Klein, who pioneered contemporary Lovecraftian fiction for mature readers, especially through the stories collected in *Demiurge: The Complete Cthulhu Mythos Tales* (2017), edited by S.T. Joshi, who also edited the manuscript of *Mr. Cannyharme*.

In an interview with *Rue Morgue*, Joshi praises the scribe’s outstanding work in the Lovecraftian vein because of its “fusing cosmic horror with a portrayal of the gritty world of drug dealers, prostitutes, and others who tend to be scorned and loathed by bourgeois society. Shea depicts these figures with a sensitivity and insight that is enviable but at the same time he makes them the victims (and a few times the victors) in a cosmic struggle with forces from beyond the cosmos. This fusion is utterly distinctive with him; I know of almost no one who has written stories of this sort.”

Shea used to work as a night clerk in San Francisco’s Mission District flophouse, so the novel is autobiographical to a point, as its main character is just such a clerk, who starts noticing strange events in the disreputable hotel, which seem to be linked to a mysterious old resident, Mr. Cannyharme. The writer’s first-hand experience and sympathy for the downtrodden are strikingly obvious in the novel’s realistic background, before the otherworldly forces start peeling off its fabric.

How such a layered and personal work remained unpublished for four

decades is a question that the author’s widow, Linda Shea, elaborates on.

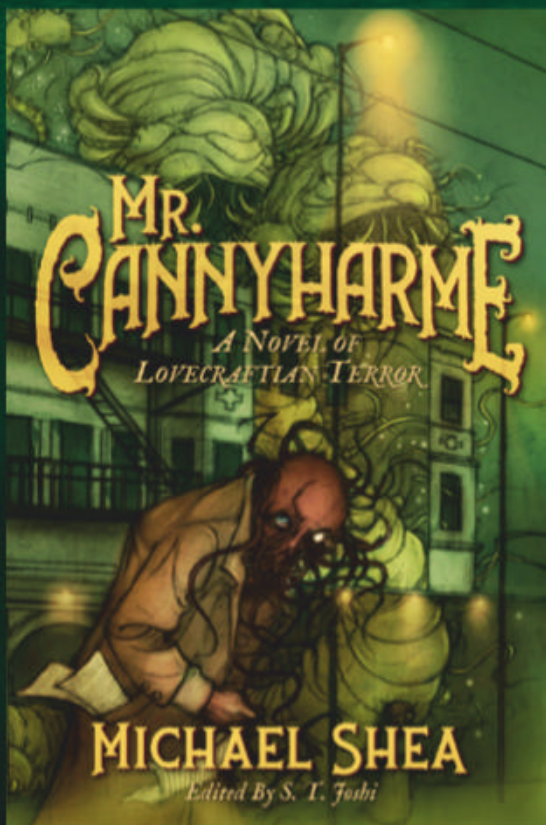
“Michael had negotiated *Mr. Cannyharme*’s sale in 1982 or 1983, but before it was published the imprint that wanted it was shuttered by its parent publishing house,” she says. “In 1983, Michael won his first World Fantasy Award for *Niff the Lean*. The interest generated by the award steered his writing explorations into epic fantasy, resulting in the production of four novels. Plus, in 1983 our first child was born, and we moved to northern California from San Francisco.”

With so much going on at the same time, the horror novel got sidetracked and almost forgotten.

“Michael never looked back at things that were finished,” she adds, “unless they had a direct reference to what he was currently involved in. Writing was something Michael needed to do, selling something he’d written was just a bonus. He just assumed things would sell, and if they didn’t immediately, he’d already moved on to the next project and didn’t think about it anymore. After the first sale didn’t work out, he put *Mr. Cannyharme* on the shelf and forgot about it. It only came back to him when I asked him decades later, since I had always liked it, if he thought it might be published. I’d piqued his interest, and he pulled it out to rework a bit. Personally, I think the novel was somewhat ahead of its time, because you could not put it into a neat bookstore genre category.”

The times have now caught up with Shea’s genre-bending ambitions, so both editor and publisher hope that the novel’s belated emergence (in a special and trade edition) will only enhance the glowing reputation that he enjoys as a pioneering author of weird fiction. Regarding *Mr. Cannyharme*’s significance for modern Lovecraftian fiction, Joshi doesn’t spare praise.

“It is incredible that Shea has taken one of Lovecraft’s poorer stories (“The Hound”) and made a full-scale novel out of it – a novel that is chillingly compelling from beginning to end. Very few successful Lovecraftian novels have ever been written, but this is one of them.” 🧛



in the subsequent pages, to be revealed.

Vale comes from a strict, religious household, where she regularly clashes with her controlling grandmother and the heavy weight of family expectations. On the cusp of adulthood, she's questioning herself and her faith and it's only making matters worse at home, so she splits to her half-sister's place in the Florida swamp for a much-needed getaway and gets a whole lot more than she bargained for. It all begins with a mysterious black wolf that leads her to a long-abandoned edifice and the group of young "clairs" (a.k.a. clairvoyants) who have been squatting in the rundown former hospital/resort for a year, using their powers to try to figure out the place's dastardly secrets. It's through these exciting new friends that Vale is able to confront

her own abilities for the first time. But not everyone's motives are as pure as hers, setting in motion the pieces for a climactic showdown featuring one of the wildest creatures to ever appear in a young adult novel.

Moon Child checks all the expected contemporary YA boxes with its coming-of-age narrative and super diverse cast of characters, but what draws you in and keeps you turning the pages is the horror story at its heart. It's one that's entwined Vale's family for generations, and now it's coming for her.

A haunted house tale that's much bigger than a mere house, and one that dares call attention to atrocities that are anything but fiction, *Moon Child* is well worth your time... that is, if you make it out alive.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

QUEEN OF TEETH

Hailey Piper
Strangehouse

In 2008, the movie *Teeth* (see *RM*#74) unleashed a new vagina dentata story on the horror film community. Thirteen years later, Hailey Piper's novel, *Queen of Teeth*, is set to do the same for the book world. Sure to disgust and delight a variety of readers, Piper balances humour, revulsion, science, and even romance to create what is likely to be one of the best horror books of 2021.

After a wild evening with a woman she picked up at a local bar, Yolanda (Yaya) Betancourt discovers teeth have sprouted between her legs. This novel could have been a quick, brutal body horror story: entertaining, but possibly lacking dimension. Piper, however, makes Yaya a relatable character and the reader is drawn in as they watch her navigate relationships, learn about her new appendages, and take on an evil corporation. There may be teeth and gore, but there is also depth, and Piper's fantastic imagination.

She has a way of weaving social commentary into the very bones of a novel. Here, readers will find discourse surrounding bodily autonomy, freedom of expression and love, as well as the oppression of an uncaring government. Because it is embedded in the very fabric of the story, it is never heavy-handed or preachy. Readers are allowed to infer as much or as little as they choose, and this is effective. As Yaya's body changes, so does the way she is treated by society at large.

Queen of Teeth promises teeth and tentacles, yet delivers so much more. The world Piper crafts is complex and believable. Further, the book defies strict genre definitions as it dabbles in horror, science fiction, and romance to create a truly toothsome experience. Fans of Piper will adore this novel and, after this delightful initiation, it's bound to draw in many new ones as well.

TRACY ROBINSON



LIBRARY OF THE DAMNED

FICTION STRANGE AND DREADFUL

Not too long ago, there were some heavy conversations taking place within the genre fiction community about how so many tables of contents were still dominated by cis white men and conventional horror narratives, despite us being more than a decade into the new millennium. Where it could have become another discussion with little active mobilization, something much more interesting happened: a noticeable shift to more diverse stories and storytellers.

This has been reflected both in the small press and the wider horror fiction world (*Mexican Gothic* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Stephen Graham Jones' *The Only Good Indians* both hit shelves last year) as well as in the review copies that find their way to me. In the first four *RM* issues of 2021 alone, I've not only read scary stories from authors hailing far from North America's shores, but tales featuring Mexican and ancient Aztec folklore, and Indigenous and transgender characters. Cumulatively, these books make horror fiction feel incredibly exciting again, because it's not just more suburban haunted houses, serial killers, and stereotypical monsters. In fact, the more I read the more I wonder where these stories have been my whole life.

Among the interesting books to land on my desk in recent months was *Hearts Strange and Dreadful* (out now from Off Limits Press), a spellbinding historical horror novel that's bound to please fans of the 2015 film *The Witch*. Penned by local Toronto author Tim McGregor and set in 1821 New England, it concerns unconventional heroine Hester Stokely and her adoptive family as an outbreak of consumption descends on their town, following the arrival of two mysterious strangers. Hester is an orphan and facially disfigured, a result of the house fire that killed her parents; these two facts inform her experience in nineteenth-century rural America more than any other. Despite being taken in by her aunt and uncle, her scars cast her as unmarriageable in both her family's eyes and her own, meaning a life of spinsterhood and servitude, though her gift at diagnosis/healing affords her some begrudging respect.

Though bullied by members of the community, Hester eventually claims some much-needed agency, ultimately proving her capacity for adaptation, leadership, and handling grisly tasks, especially after the odd superstitions she previously dismissed appear to hold a terrifying truth. Thus, the novel's ending is painfully bittersweet, and very much a product of its setting: a place and time where a woman taking matters into her own hands comes with unintended consequences. Still, no reader of *Hearts Strange and Dreadful* will view Hester as diminished or in any way broken. We could only hope to be so strong and brave, scars or not.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

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HOMETOWN

"I was born and raised in North Carolina, and am currently living in Phoenix, Arizona."

WEAPON OF CHOICE

"I sculpt predominantly in polymer clay and my sculptures are usually mixed media pieces. After brainstorming and gathering reference material, I start with a rough size/proportion sketch and then jump right into sculpting a head/face. Then comes building the armature or base for the rest of the piece, and then sculpting the rest of the body for a sculpture, or hands and feet for an art doll. Then paint, varnish, adding hair and creating a soft body, sewing a costume, and making accessories (and base, if that applies)."

DEEDS

"I started making my creatures in 2017, so I felt proud to have my first solo gallery show in 2019. That same year, a number of my pieces were purchased by a museum owner/art collector in Austin and my work was set up as a permanent installation in the museum! This year, 2021, I was commissioned by that same museum, Museum of the Weird in Austin, Texas, to make a sculpture for their PT Barnum/Feejee Mermaid exhibit."

MY NIGHTMARE FUEL

"I have an interest in folklore, mythology, cryptids, classic carnival and freakshow culture, and I love anything Halloween. Also, I'm inspired on the daily by all the artists I keep up with online, being able to consistently witness so much talent and dedication definitely helps keep a fire lit under my ass."

LAST WORDS

"The only thing I could hope to express to people that are curious in art or are looking to make a creative or a positive change in their life, is to just do it. If you are able to, take the leap. I didn't find and follow my passion for art until my thirties, but now it is what drives me and I look forward to getting up in the morning to create."

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A DUMPSTER DIVE INTO HORROR'S ODDS & CURIOS

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

BY
STACIE
PONDER

I FEEL CONFIDENT THAT I THINK ABOUT HALLOWEEN: RESURRECTION MORE OFTEN THAN THE AVERAGE HORROR FAN.

In fact, I'm quite certain that I think about that film more often than anyone involved with it does. The most interesting thing about it — although “interesting” seems too strong a word, really — is that it is a purely “2002” glimpse into a cultural moment when the cyberworld was still full of promise and excitement; you know, the moment immediately before reality television, the internet, and technology completely changed the face of... well, everything, but entertainment and pop culture in particular.

Whatever historical merit [Halloween: Resurrection](#) may have, however, is far outweighed by its many, many sins: the misspelling of an actor's name in the credits, for example; the undignified and unnecessary death of an iconic character; the complete lack of atmosphere and/or thrills; the far-too-heavy eyebrows on Michael Myers' mask; and on it goes. But there's one detail that plagues me, that keeps this movie in my mind while the rest of the world has wisely moved on and forgotten it, and that detail concerns, of all things, a spice rack.

The film sees Busta Rhymes and Tyra Banks, the masterminds behind DangerTainment Productions, lock a group of college students in The Old Myers Place for an overnight live internet broadcast in the hopes that they, unlike the qualified medical professionals, will be able to figure out why Michael enjoys killing people so much. One of the students, Rudy, is an aspiring chef who heads for the Myers kitchen upon arrival. He cracks open a jar of fennel and sniffs it, expecting it to be as rank as the house and everything in it, having supposedly sat abandoned for 40 years. But there is a shocking twist: “That's strange,” Rudy says. “It smells fresh.”

Let me tell you, that fresh fennel is scrawled all over my brain in classic cinematic “crazy person” writing, like a page from that diary in *The Bye Bye Man*. Sometimes I worry I'll catch myself writing LENNEF HSERF in lipstick on a door à la Dan-

ny “REDRUM” Torrance. Why? Because I must know: who put the fennel there?

There are only two possibilities, one of which is that the crew at DangerTainment planted it, along with the few eerie props they brought to the house to ensure there would, in fact, be some “dangertainment” during the live broadcast. But this means that along with a fake desiccated corpse, some fake stereotypical Horror Movie Kid-style spooky drawings, and a fake baby's high chair with restraints attached, they brought... a real jar of fresh fennel? What, just in case someone decided to pluck it from the spice rack and sniff it? This was a prop DangerTainment included to convince the participants (and the audience watching the stream) that Michael Myers still lives in his childhood murder home?

The other possibility, of course, is that the fresh fennel really does belong to Michael Myers. Either way, we are meant to believe that he sprinkles this herb on the rats he otherwise eats raw whilst down in his lair, tucked away in the massive service tunnel underneath the house.

This is the kind of problem we get when slasher franchises continue for too long and filmmakers will do anything to explain why, how, and where a killer continues to kill. Histories and motivations grow increasingly complex (and nonsensical) as the decades pass. And so over the years, Michael Myers, force of evil, who was once merely a child born bad and driven to kill, passed into and out of a Druid cult before driving across the country on a quest to kill his sister. Then he returned to his childhood home but decided to live in a tunnel under said home, venturing upstairs only to kill the occasional intruder or to grab his jar of fresh fennel for mealtimes.

Would I be so tortured if, say, Michael Myers ended up in outer space in *Halloween: Resurrection*? Would this plague me less than his ending up a possible culinary herb enthusiast? I think so. I'm not sure what that says about me or about horror movies in general, but I suppose they don't call this DangerTainment for nothin'. 🍷

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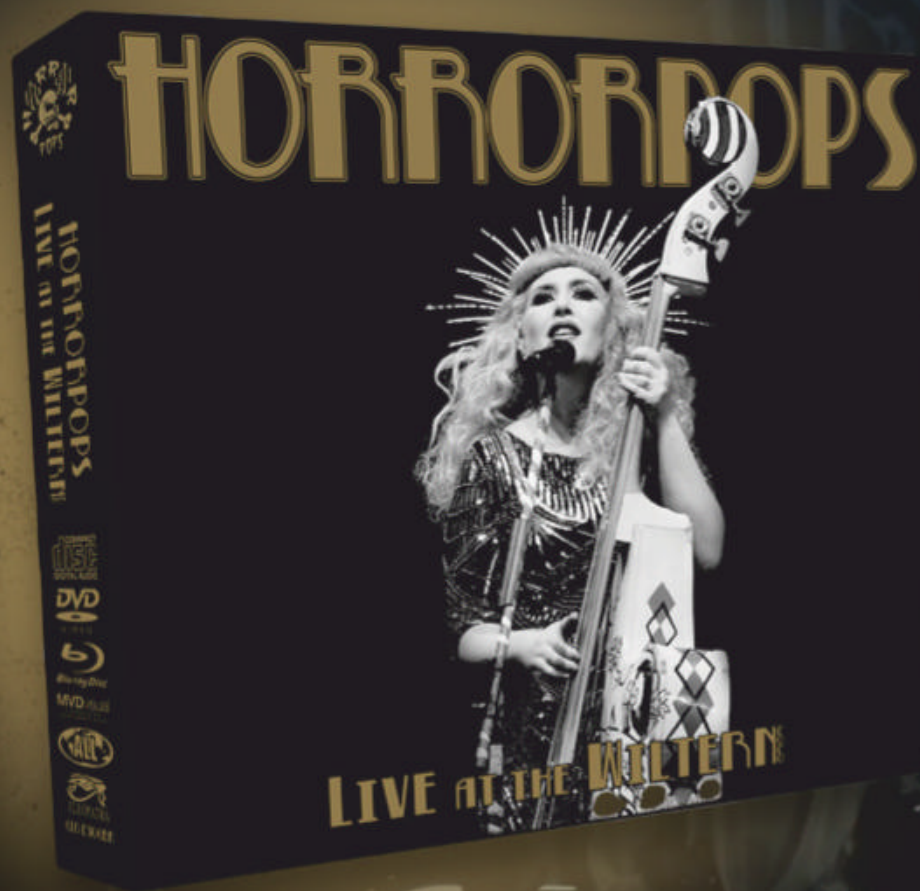
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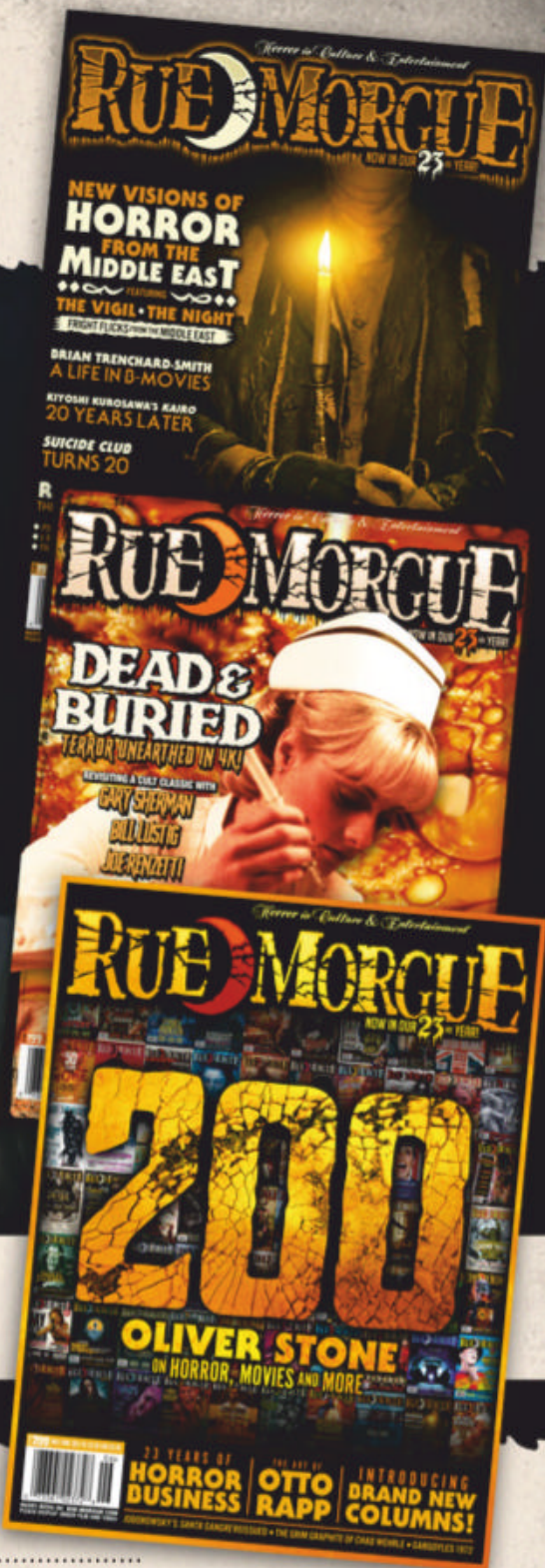
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ARRIVAL

REVIEWS BY JESSICA BUCK, ALEX DELLER, RYAN DYER,
AARON VON LUPTON, CHRIS ROWELLA, JEFF SZPIRGAS, AND GLENN TILSON



SCAVENGER

Various

CLEOPATRA RECORDS

Genre fans tend to expect a certain style of music to accompany a film about a post-apocalyptic world where an organ-dealing assassin exacts bloody revenge, and as far as the Argentinian action/horror *Scavenger* is concerned, this soundtrack is right on the money. It starts on a high note with Rosetta Stone's aptly titled "Adrenaline," followed by rockabilly pieces by The Meteors and The 69 Cats before the good vibes are interrupted by several dissonant, industrial noise tracks. Listeners will be drawn back in by The Coffin Daggers' surf hit "Chidori No Kyoku," only to be subsequently bounced around in a mixed bag of goth, alt-rock, psych, and pop punk – as if you're on a road trip and the person with the shortest attention span is in charge of the tunes. While there are a lot of quality individual songs here, *Scavenger* is a difficult record to throw on and enjoy all the way through. ☠☠☠ JB



NIGHTMARE CITY

Stelvio Cipriani

DEATH WALTZ RECORDING COMPANY

Umberto Lenzi's infamous oatmeal-faced 1980 zombie opus *Nightmare City* (a.k.a. *Incubo Sulla Città Contaminata*) is the kind of high-octane Italian romp where you expect to hear a similarly kinetic electronic score backing up the mayhem. Instead, the more lounge and jazz-oriented late maestro Stelvio Cipriani

was employed to give the film its sonic template. The score kicks off with the methodically paced "L'Atessa," a main theme dominated by bass and drum rhythms, punctuated by an evil-sounding synthesizer as well as vibraphone and saxophone. This recurring theme pops up again and again, with electric guitar representing the appearance of the toxic zombies. Elsewhere, "I'll Find My Way to You," with vocals by Grace Jones, provides some period-appropriate disco beats. This double 140-gram LP pressed on "Contamination Green" vinyl reflects the same track listing as the 2013 Digitmovies CD. If grooves and goosebumps are your thing, give this one a spin. ☠☠☠½ AVL



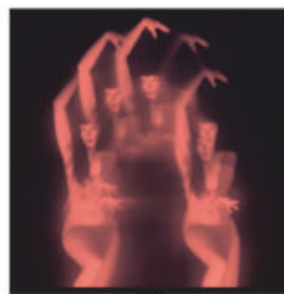
GRIDFAILURE FEATURING MAC GOLLEHON

Dismemberment Cabaret

NEFARIOUS INDUSTRIES

Gridfailure's David Brenner is no stranger to unsettling sounds nor to interesting collaborations, but he outdoes himself with *Dismemberment Cabaret*. Here, Brenner's bleak industrial hellscapes are paired with fractured brass instrumentation courtesy of Mac Gollehon – a musician who's accompanied David Bowie, Madonna, and Grace Jones. You have to wonder how Gollehon found himself in such a disturbing place, having stumbled from the cheery Billy Ocean megahit "Get Outta My Dreams, Get Into My Car" to a part of town where things are more "Get Outta My Nightmare, Get Into My Hearse." Static crackles and drones glower, while vocals mowl, hector, and howl. Amid this, strains of trumpet, trombone, and didgeridoo are threaded, lending the bed-shitting noise and *Maniac*-style sleaze a sense of late-night noir. It's a bewildering but utterly compelling combination – something you can imagine Pinhead

slinging on when it's 3am, he can't sleep, and he's endlessly overthinking every bad decision he's ever made. ☠☠☠ AD



GOST

Rites of Love and Reverence

CENTURY MEDIA RECORDS

Like many of us over the last year, Gost had a lot of time to think. In fact, the solo artist spent the year considering how witchcraft has impacted women throughout history; an exploration that gave rise to a new album, *Rites of Love and Reverence*. Aptly dropping on Friday the 13th of August, it lives up to the candlelit spookiness, with song titles such as "Bound By the Horror," "Coven," and "Embrace the Blade." Favouring layer upon layer of synth, razor-sharp guitar lines, and low, hypnotic vocals, the album is impeccably balanced while refusing to get too comfortable. Keeping with a distinct theme, each track plays with a new tempo,

tone, and style. Despite the moody stomping beats and general gloom, the whole thing is oddly danceable, making it one to grab on release day for your solo bedroom dark rave in celebration of horror's holiest date.

☠☠☠½ JB



ZOMBI

Liquid Crystal

RELAPSE RECORDS

The pandemic may have sidelined the working lives of many, but not Zombi's Steve Moore. Following a full-length (2020) and memorable scores for two Joe Begos joints (*Bliss* and *VFW*), the multi-instrumentalist was quickly back in the studio with drummer Anthony Paterra to lay down tracks for *Liquid Crystal*. Those familiar with the duo know what to expect: Carpenter/Goblin worship of the highest order peppered with some heavier rock and metal flourishes in the Russian Circles and Pelican vein. The title track is highlighted

IN THE EARTH

Clint Mansell

LAKESHORE RECORDS

Like a cutting clipped from a larger plant, Clint Mansell's score for Ben Wheatley's pandemic-themed eco-horror *In the Earth* is a completely viable piece of art, even severed from the film. Interestingly, despite the organic woodland setting, composer Mansell eschews natural acoustic instruments for synthesizers, and his dreamlike textures suggest both the majesty and terror of the movie's feral setting, at once lush and foreboding. Mansell even utilizes a MIDI Sprout to integrate the bioelectrical signals from actual plants into the music; though this secret life of plants owes less to Stevie Wonder and more to the Carpenteresque synth pulses that reverberate throughout the score. The music mostly evokes the ominous drone of Ennio Morricone's *The Thing*, particularly on the extended, standout track "Spirit of the Woods." Still, Mansell brings his own voice to the synthesized compositions, which improve upon repeated listenings, even as the score walks in Carpenter's shadow. ☠☠☠½ JS



PODCASTS FROM BEYOND



HAUNTED TALKS

THEME: Paranormal Discussion

FREQUENCY: Several times per month

The folks behind the *Haunted Walk* – a ghost tour company in Toronto, Ottawa, and Kingston, Ontario – are *really* into spooky stuff. So much so, they've created a podcast to encompass all the stories that don't fit into their thematic walks. Hosted by creative director Jim Dean, the *Haunted Talks* podcast doesn't stick to basic hauntings, but dabbles in mysterious happenings, historical events, and interviews with professionals in the paranormal realm as well. Ranging from about 30 to 45 minutes, each episode typically features Dean as a single narrator supported by sparse and subdued sound effects. While the *Haunted Walk* may be an Ontario-centric venture, the podcast covers stories from around the globe, including the ghosts of Maine's Mount Hope Cemetery (a location favoured by Stephen King, natch), Ireland's haunted Castle Leap, and Russia's Dyatlov Pass incident. Taking the road less travelled is what helps *Haunted Talks* stand out from the crowd; with the help of professors, doctors, writers, and psychics, Dean tackles unique topics such as the science of fear, curses, death fraud, miracles, and law enforcement's encounters with the paranormal. Akin to their ghost tours, each story presented in the podcast is well researched, well told, and allows the listener to make up their own minds about what they've heard. Episodes have been dropping several times a month since 2015, so there's a vast library waiting for you to explore. ☠☠☠ JESSICA BUCK



A NIGHTMARE ON FIERCE STREET

THEME: Film Analysis

FREQUENCY: Semi-weekly

Despite the meteoric rise of the format in the last decade, there are still perspectives that are usually overlooked or ignored in the horror podcast world, which is part of what makes *A Nightmare on Fierce Street* so refreshing. Hosts Sharai Bohannon and Trent Reese always approach their subject with well-researched professionalism but their conversation remains jovial, even when tackling such subjects as bigotry. The friendly conversational tone is augmented by the slightly small production value (i.e. if each episode sounds like it was recorded via Zoom, it's because it was). One of the very first episodes tackles *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2*, where they analyze the clumsy and problematic queer-coding surrounding that film as well as the intense homophobia from both production and audiences. A great starting point for newer listeners is their episode on Neil Marshall's *The Descent*, where Trent enjoys the film while acknowledging its problems, while Sharai (rightly) refuses to forgive the shallow, male-written female characters. Another huge selling point is the sheer density of their programming, with episodes coming out semi-weekly at a minimum, featuring an increasing roster of impressive guest hosts, including actress Lauren Birdsong and theatre academic Dr. Julie Rae Mollenkamp. If you're looking for a metric buttload of new content that tackles difficult subject matter from the sort of voices that usually get talked over, *A Nightmare on Fierce Street* is the podcast to binge. ☠☠☠ DAKOTA DAHL

by a David Gilmour-esque guitar solo, while centrepiece "Turning Points" takes you on an eleven-minute journey through what a Roger Dean album cover would sound like if it came to life. Overall, *Liquid Crystal* is a bit more laid-back than 2020 and its predecessor, 2015's *Shape Shift*, but there is no shortage of atmosphere and sinister vibes. If it's a sign of what comes next, count us in.

☠☠☠½ CR



VIDEO NASTY

ROCK

Video Nasty

PETRICHOR/HAMMERHEART RECORDS

Named after the series of films labelled obscene in the UK in the 1980s, Video Nasty combines relatively obscure horror themes and titles with the thrash genre to create a horror-metal hybrid. The Michael Myers-inspired cover art by Nalle Mielonen conveys a prelude to what is to come – namely, some hacking and slashing inside a suburban home. "Video Nasty" opens the seven-track album with a slew of riffs and samples from *The Exorcist*, *Friday the 13th Part 2*, and *Evil Dead 2*. "Black Christmas" is no Christmas carol, telling of Billy's exploits through a song as nasty as those fleshy Christmas cookies in the 2006 remake. The final track is Sepultura cover "Antichrist" (not based on the Lars Von Trier film), making for a suitably repugnant end to a short but sweet debut. Let's hope the sequel raises the nudity and body count. ☠☠☠ RD



KARPENTER

METAL

Sleepless

ROCKSHOTS RECORDS

An Italian band fixated on horror? Can such things be? Kidding aside, newcomer Karpenter turns an evil eye across the Atlantic, finding inspiration in such classics as *Jaws* (first single

"Shark") and *Psycho* ("No Vacancy") as well as more cult fare including *Tremors* ("Perfection Valley") and "The Swamp Thing." The titular instrumental is a suitable intro with a very Carpenteresque synth part that adds escalating metal guitars before bursting into the anthemic, chorus-driven "Mechanical Sense," which sets the tone for much of the rest of the album. Still, the sounds may fall short for *Rue Morgue* readers: aside from the synths (on "Falconer" and "Dark Mountain Side"), there's no particular darkness or eeriness that would lead one to guess this is a horror-themed album. An enjoyable way to wile away the sleepless hours, just don't expect it to keep you up at night. ☠☠☠ GT



PIG DESTROYER

METAL

Pornographers of Sound: Live in NYC

RELAPSE RECORDS

Pig Destroyer recently announced a surprise live album *Pornographers of Sound: Live in NYC*, consisting of two combined concerts forming a total of 23 tracks from a couple of their last pre-pandemic shows in October 2019 at Saint Vitus Bar in Brooklyn. With the music spanning their near 25-year history, the band is well aware that too much in one gear is boring, so tracks such as the churning "Loathsome" or "Starbelly" offer a breath of air from the likes of "Cheerleader Corpses" or "Piss Angel." The band's weak link is vocalist J.R. Hayes, who often sounds winded by the third or fourth song. With this live record though, comparing the first track "Sis" to the encore, "Junkyard God," there are no discrepancies in quality – there's still plenty of frothy bile in Hayes' throat, though he does ask the crowd for a cigarette after the show, which must have felt like a happy ending massage in his mouth after such a larynx-demolishing set.

☠☠☠ RD



THE BLOODY BALLADS AMIGO ^{OF} THE DEVIL

EVERYONE KNOWS YOU SHOULDN'T JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER, but if there's one thing I've learned over the last several months of the pandemic it's that you shouldn't judge a dark folk solo artist by his name. Case in point: musician Danny Kiranos performs under the moniker Amigo the Devil. It sounds like some kind of horrible juggalo/nu-metal mashup, but instead offers up some of the most unique, heart-wrenching ballads about serial killers, suicide, depression, and cinematic violence this side of The Louvin Brothers and Waylon Jennings.

Though Kiranos has been writing and recording songs for well over ten years, Amigo the Devil really made its mark in 2018 with *Volume 1*, a collection of demo EPs based mostly around true crime and often told from the point of view of the serial killer. It was followed by the ironically titled *Everything is Fine* the same year, a more personal album filled with ballads about Kiranos' depressed mental state. Now, a brand-new release called *Born Against* on the Regime label sees Kiranos pushing his musical and lyrical boundaries with a more dynamic sound and more stories about loneliness, murder, and the less savoury aspects of humanity.

"I think my fascination with horror is the same fascination I have with true crime," Kiranos told me over Zoom from his home in central Texas. "It's the exploration of the primal urge to fight fear and the excitement you get from actual fear itself. It creates instincts in you that you don't really feel otherwise. I hadn't felt another emotion that brought out that defense mechanism and from there it became more of a psychological challenge of trying to explore why these people do this stuff."

While true crime was the focus of Kiranos' early writings, things

took a sinister turn with the *Everything is Fine* album. The track "If I'm Crazy" describes love from a mentally ill point of view; "You Are Perfect Too" explains what happens when anxiety and violence mix; while "I Hope Your Husband Dies" is... fairly self-explanatory. But the album is probably best known for the track "First Day of the End of My Life," which tackles even darker subject matter.

"I collect a lot of stuff, and one of the things I started collecting is suicide notes," Kiranos says of the song's inspiration. "It was an interesting situation to be the caretaker of somebody's final possession. I was very curious to see if there was some sort of link between them. And if that's the case, what is the string being pulled between these circumstances and these tragedies? Unfortunately, I found that they are all just as unique as the people. Then a weird thing happened where they started fucking with me a lot and I had to get rid of them slowly, passing them on to the care of somebody else. They started infiltrating me. I realized maybe some things need to be preserved in their own realm."

So what are we to expect from *Born Against*?

"A lot of weird shit! We kind of went off the rails on this one, and that's what I wanted. There is some of the old *Volume 1*-style storytelling/violence type stuff. Sonically it's much more abrasive but, in my mind, it's more well rounded... there are actually some references to some horror films in there in the lyrics. I won't spoil them, but someone will catch them. There's some really deep dives in there."

Pour yourself a whiskey one of these summer nights, light a cigar, and let Amigo the Devil take you to even deeper pits of despair... it's not like you've got anywhere to go! 🍷

Amigo The Devil
born against



PLAY DEAD



NOW PLAYING > THE GHOSTS OF FMV GAMES STILL LINGER BY EVAN MILLAR

If you weren't an active player of video games in the '90s, it's possible that you missed out on an odd yet incredibly charming subgenre: the wonderful, wacky, and occasionally woeful world of full-motion video (FMV) horror games. Back then, utilizing pre-recorded video for cinematic cut scenes entailed hours of hard drive-hogging high-definition video, but thanks to titles like *The Infectious Madness of Doctor Dekker* and *Erica*, the format is currently experiencing an unlikely resurgence in gaming, and many of these newer horror entries boast truly unsettling levels of terror.

Recently funded through [Kickstarter](#) and buzzing loudly through the horror gaming community online, *GHOSTS* from developer Visible Games is poised to be the next great FMV horror title. Written and directed by Jed Shepard (who co-wrote last year's breakout indie hit *Host*), *GHOSTS* puts players in the shoes of a reality TV producer, stationed in a broadcast van on the streets while directing his cast of paranormal explorers. Gameplay will consist of observing the live footage captured by the camera crew and guiding the players as they're stalked by the villainous Long Lady, who will be designed by horror illustrator (and one-time *RM* intern!) Trevor Henderson and brought to life by Jim Henson's Creature Shop. As if that wasn't enough, in a unique and unprecedented twist, the game will *only* be playable at night: after 10 p.m. local time. If that's not a recipe for game-induced nightmares, I don't know what is.

It shouldn't be surprising that horror and FMV games have long gone hand-in-severed-hand, with classic titles such as the Sega CD's *Night Trap* and PC's *Phantasmagoria* making hefty waves in the entertainment world in the early-to-mid-'90s. Not only was *Night Trap* directly responsible for the creation of the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) along with the horror-adjacent *Mortal Kombat*, but *Phantasmagoria* was perhaps the most expensive undertaking in the world of video games at the time of its release, with an estimated budget of \$4.5 million in 1995.

While *Night Trap*'s FMV elements were limited to the video footage that the player character was able to cycle through via a digitized user interface (UI), the more adventure game-structured *Phantasmagoria* blended computer-generated



Night Trap

ated backdrops with live-action actors and props to tell the tale of a woman tormented by an evil long-dead magician who possesses her husband. The more obscure and supremely fucked-up *Harvester* (1996) utilized a similar symbiosis of interactive film and sprite work to create its surreal atmosphere of dread, most notably in a scene involving a deranged mother reacting to her infant child's eyes oozing out of its head by casually reaching over and popping them back in. That one still haunts me.

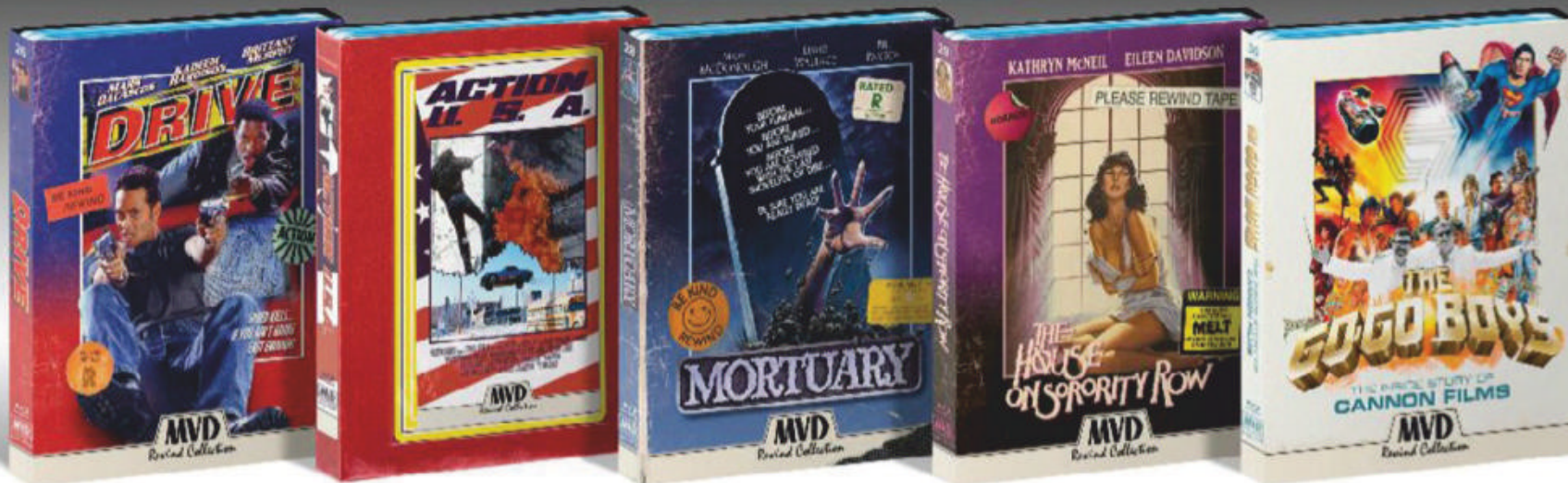
As *Harvester* and its ilk prove, FMV offered great potential for ramping up the cinematic terror in horror titles in creative and interactive ways, but as with many of the genre's most innovative gimmicks, the overbearing novelty of what was then considered to be "cutting-edge" technology was the very thing that led to its decline. Games like 1994's *Corpse Killer*, for example, were hilarious oddities at the time of their release, and though the title is still enjoyable, it's FMV zombies are akin to Party City monstrosities; a fact that works in

low-budget indie movies but not so much in the digital world. While the idea of an interactive horror movie seems appealing, it's important that players are able to exercise enough decision-making to keep the experience, well, interactive. Within the past ten years alone, titles such as *The Infectious Madness of Doctor Dekker* and the FMV-inspired *Until Dawn* have made good on those squandered opportunities and demonstrated the powerful storytelling that's made possible within a cinematic, choose-your-own-adventure style game.

We won't know until early next year, but as a somewhat begrudging lover of this weird and wild genre, it's my sincere hope that *GHOSTS* will further elevate the experience through a combination of camera trickery and practical monster effects. If Shepard and Visible Games stay true to their promise of straying away from "gamification" elements that overly dictate what players must do and where to go, we may be in for one hell of a wild ride.



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WHAT IS THE BEST PERFORMANCE IN A HORROR MOVIE FROM A NON-HUMAN CASTMEMBER?

JOSE CRUZ

The Truck from [Duel](#) (1971)

"Neither Dracula nor the Black Lagoon Creature nor even Norman Bates can hold an air freshener to this demon of the blacktop."

WITH A TANKER FULL OF RAGE AND A FACE IN ITS GRILLWORK THAT ONLY A MECHANIC COULD LOVE, THE VILLAINOUS TRUCK FROM THIS ESSENTIAL MADE-FOR-TV MOVIE should take the top spot for best non-human performer. In his debut film, Steven Spielberg brings the automotive antagonist of Richard Matheson's tense short story to life by lensing the Truck with the same encroaching menace that would prove so successful in *Jaws* (1975).

Much like that underwater predator, the Truck is an ordinary fixture of life made into something mythic and monstrous. With its belching smoke, roaring engine, and glowering headlights, the Truck appears for all the world like a mechanized dragon spat up from a rest stop in Hell. And its sole purpose is to chase down and devour Dennis Weaver's errant knight-cum-businessman in the primal wonderland of the California mountains.

That we never see the face of the driver hellbent on torturing Weaver's character adds that much more to the Truck's presence. The occasional glimpse of a booted heel and a suntanned fist are the only evidence of a human agency at work, but most often, we're left with the feeling that the Truck is really the one in the driver's seat. Even as it sits in a café parking lot, effectively "driverless," danger radiates from its body as fiercely as the desert sun.

Expertly handled by veteran stunt driver Carey Loftin, the Truck is able to project the emotions of each scene in its rusted, rattling framework: playfulness, generosity, patience, and a mad, implacable appetite. It even gets a final scene worthy of its prehistoric awesomeness. Without a doubt, the Truck is easily the most terrifying monster to creep off the Universal backlot. Neither Dracula nor the Black Lagoon Creature nor even Norman Bates can hold an air freshener to this demon of the blacktop. When it comes to performances human or otherwise, the Truck manslaughters the competition. 🦋



JOE O'BRIEN

Jed (the dog) from [The Thing](#) (1982)

"Jed gives an actual performance, projecting a distinct non-canine intelligence in all his scenes."

IT'S NO SECRET JOHN CARPENTER'S *THE THING* SHOWCASES AN EXCEPTIONAL ENSEMBLE CAST, WHO COLLECTIVELY TRANSFORM A 1930s PULP NOVELLA INTO AN ICEBOUND *Glengarry Glen Ross*. But too often overlooked is the truly outstanding actor who brought *The Thing*'s most critical role to life. Let's talk about Jed.

Part Vancouver Island wolf, part Alaskan Malamute, Jed made his screen debut as the titular dog-imitating shapeshifter, pursued across a desolate polar landscape by a pair of trigger-happy Swedes (sorry, Norwegians) in a helicopter. Carpenter skillfully manipulates our sympathy (much as Jed manipulates the inhabitants of Outpost 31), but it soon becomes clear that there's something off about that dog. He seems to be not just thinking, but *calculating*. It's as subtle as it is unnerving; no Rob Bottin effects required.

Most animal actors are trained to execute simple commands shot-by-shot, guided by an off-screen handler. Jed gives an actual performance, projecting a distinct non-canine intelligence in all his scenes (Richard Masur, who played dog handler Clark, confirms that Jed was like this off-camera as well). But his most impressive moment is also his subtlest; it's what he doesn't do that's important.

One of *The Thing*'s creepiest shots is a single-take low-angle tracking back through one of Outpost 31's many claustrophobic corridors. As Jed systematically searches room by room, he pauses briefly as the camera dollies away from him... and doesn't react to it. Picture something roughly the size of a Volkswagen Beetle, festooned with camera equipment and crew, suddenly lurching away from you. Veteran actors will sometimes struggle not to flinch as these rigs travel in their eyeline. But Jed remains eerily still, awaiting his next cue... and his first victim.

Jed later found mainstream success in movies like *White Fang* and *The Journey of Natty Gann*. After completing *White Fang 2: Myth of the White Wolf* in 1994, he retired to his trainer Clint Rowe's animal sanctuary. He passed away peacefully a year later, aged eighteen years, his status forever assured as horror cinema's all-time champion Good Boy – and horror's greatest non-human performance. 🦋

LAST ISSUE'S WINNER
AS VOTED BY YOU ON TWITTER

WHAT IS THE BEST WORST HORROR MOVIE SEQUEL EVER MADE?

Amityville Horror:
The Evil Escapes

29%

71%

Howling II: Your
Sister is a Werewolf

HOWLING II: YOUR SISTER IS A WEREWOLF IS THE BEST
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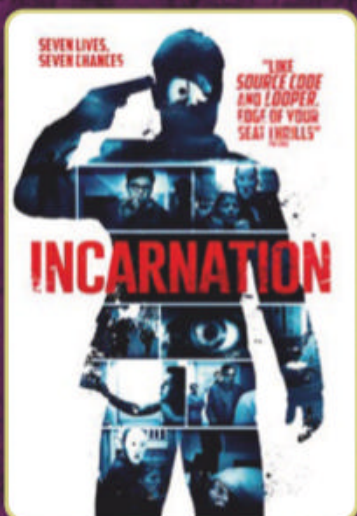
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